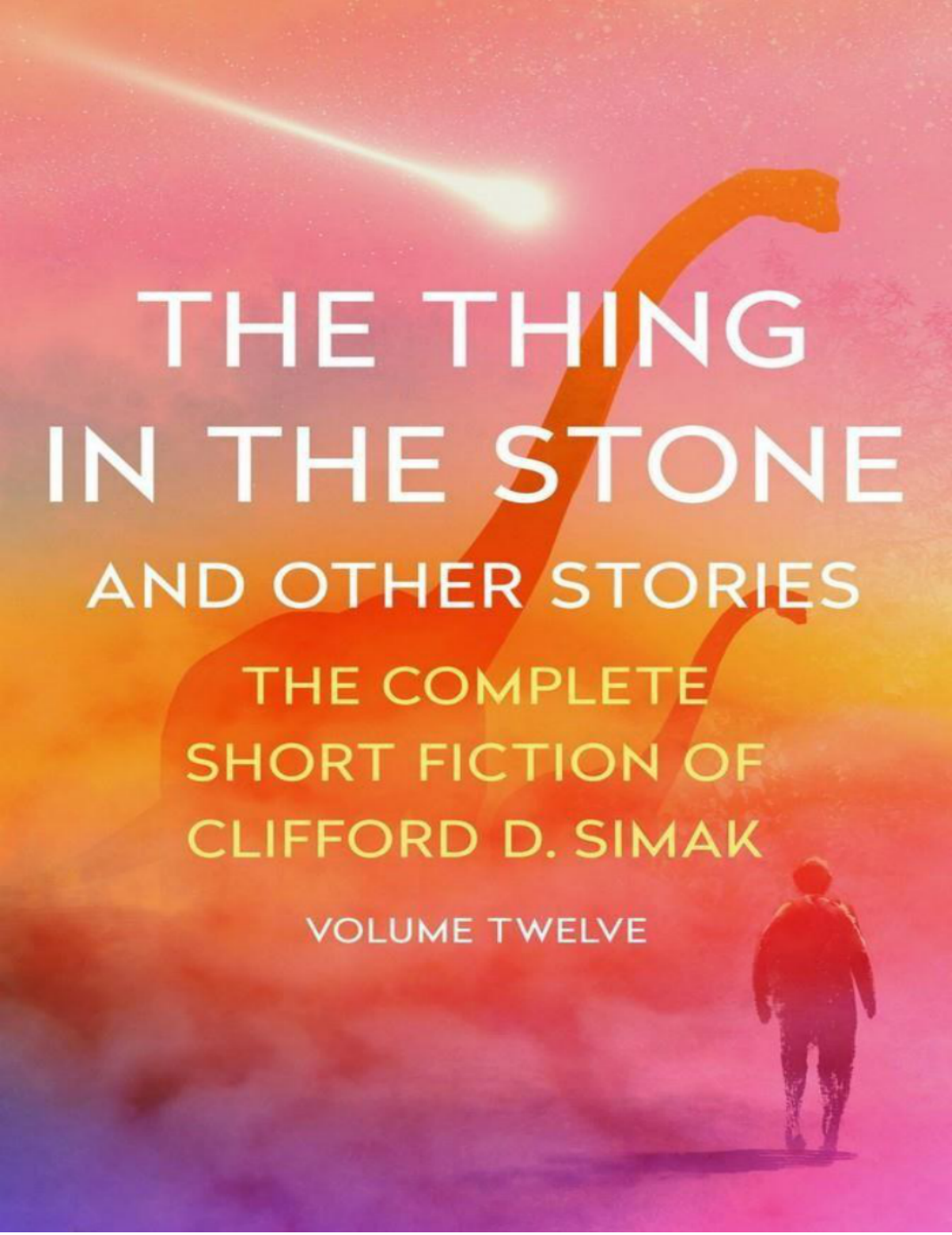
THE THING
IN THE STONE
AND OTHER STORIES
THE COMPLETE
SHORT FICTION OF
CLIFFORD D. SIMAK
VOLUME TWELVE

SHOUT
SHARE
IT

Annotation

A mind-opening collection of short science fiction from one of the genre's most revered Grand Masters.

Legendary author Robert A. Heinlein proclaimed, "To read science fiction is to read Simak. A reader who does not like Simak stories does not like science fiction at all." The remarkably talented Clifford D. Simak was able to ground his vast imagination in reality, and then introduce readers to fantastical worlds and concepts they could instantly and completely dig into, comprehend, and enjoy.

In the title story, a man's newfound ability to walk in the past allows him to dwell among dinosaurs, saber-toothed tigers . . . and something even more timeless. In "Construction Shack," the first manned expedition to Pluto reveals that no matter how advanced aliens may be, even they don't always get everything right. And in "Univac 2200," the thin line between humans creating technology and humans becoming technology is about to be crossed—and there may be no going back.

Each story includes an introduction by David W. Wixon, literary executor of the Clifford D. Simak estate and editor of this ebook.

- The Thing in the Stone
  - ○
  - ○ Introduction
  - ○ The Thing in the Stone
  - ○ The World of the Red Sun
    - ■
    - ■ CHAPTER I
    - ■ CHAPTER II
    - ■ CHAPTER III
    - ■ EPILOGUE
  - ○ Skirmish
  - ○ Aesop
  - ○ The Hangnoose Army Rides to Town!
    - ■
    - ■ CHAPTER ONE
    - ■ CHAPTER TWO
    - ■ CHAPTER THREE
    - ■ CHAPTER FOUR
  - ○ Univac: 2200
  - ○ The Creator
    - ■
    - ■ FOREWORD

- CHAPTER ONE
- CHAPTER TWO
- CHAPTER THREE
- CHAPTER FOUR
- CHAPTER FIVE
- CHAPTER SIX

- The Spaceman’s Van Gogh
- Hunch
- Construction Shack
- About the Author
- About the Editor

The Thing in the Stone
And Other Stories
The Complete Short Fiction of Clifford D. Simak, Volume Twelve

Introduction by David W. Wixon

Introduction
Clifford D. Simak: Seeker After the Truth
by David W. Wixon

> *"'His world sounds like a dismal one,' she said. 'Dismal and holy. The two so often go together.'"*
>
> *—Clifford D. Simak, in Special Deliverance*

Most people who have read a fair amount of Clifford D. Simak's fiction will, if asked to give a succinct description of it, resort to mentioning robots, talking dogs, or pastoralism; few will speak of religion.

Probably that is because the term "religion," when Simak uses it at all (and he does not actually use the very word all that often), may encompass a wide variety of subjects—from theology and philosophy, on the one hand, through ecclesiastical organizations to the most primitive of superstition. Sometimes one of those concepts will be front-and-center in a Simak story (for example *Project Pope* or "The Spaceman's Van Gogh," *The Fellowship of the Talisman* or "The Voice in the Void"), but often the "religious" concept is merely a part of the background, almost a sort of throwaway line. However, when viewed in the aggregate, it becomes obvious that all of those lines are there because they came to the mind of the author as he was writing. And the number of those occasions makes it clear in turn that the subject of religion was seldom far from Simak's mind.

Perhaps strangely, this happened even though Simak was never a member of any organized religion or sect. (Occasionally one may find "biographical" essays about the author which state that he was a Roman Catholic; that is incorrect. Although Simak's Czech ancestors almost certainly were Catholic—in fact, one of his prize possessions was an ancient rosary that, he told me, came down through the family from a very devout female ancestor—the family story had it that Cliff's paternal grandfather had cut all ties with the Church following a loud disagreement with a parish priest. And they apparently never picked an alternative.)

But the Simak family had the habit of thoughtfulness, and Cliff's parents, John and Maggie, engaged in a great deal of reading and

discussion—including their two sons from an early age. And it seems clear that if the Simak family had given up the Church, they never gave up most of the principles, the underlying values, which they had learned. (Although it seems a mere detail, I have always been intrigued by the fact that the family's stone, in the old Wisconsin country graveyard in which Cliff's parents lie, is topped by a carved representation of an open book; almost certainly the book, a not-uncommon feature of grave markers of that era, represented a Bible, but I have a suspicion that to the family it had a more generalized meaning, too.)

As I said, Cliff Simak was not a churchgoer. But he was not blind to the concepts we associate with religion (in the most general sense of that word), such as spirituality.

In general, readers and critics seem to conclude that the sense of morality so strong in Simak stories is a "traditional" one; and while I will agree that Cliff was aware of and influenced by the mores of his time, I would suggest that his sense of morality did not so much result from traditional religion as from the application of the author's common sense to the need of sentient beings to live with each other in the Universe. He used his mind to explore such concepts all through his life, and several times seemed to suggest that there might exist some sort of "universal" code of ethics that all intelligent beings could subscribe to. (Indeed, even in his last days, when writing was beyond him, one of the works he kept by his chair, to "dip into," as he said—was the collected works of Thoreau … I suspect the two men, as writers and thinkers, had a lot in common.)

In light of the frequency with which "religious" ideas would appear in Clifford D. Simak's stories, it is hardly surprising that the very first of his stories to see print, "The World of the Red Sun" (1931), revolved around an alien being who came to the Earth of the far future to find the human race fallen into a primitive state and who used his superior powers to set himself up as a god for humankind. And in "The Voice in the Void," appearing the very next year, Simak gave an ugly portrayal of the religion of the Martians civilization.

The concept of repulsive primitive religions was, of course, hardly unique to Simak; it fact, it was a frequent feature of adventure fiction in his time. But in 1935, Simak raised a stir among science fiction fans with his story "The Creator," which was seen as violating publishing taboos by portraying humans battling—and defeating—the being who had created our Universe. It would lead to the sardonic labeling of some of Cliff's stories as his "sacrilegious" stories.

In the following years of his career, Simak used religion, or religious ideas, dozens of times: In "Rule 18" (1938), his protagonist, marooned in North America's past, ends the story resolving to head

south to become a god for the Aztecs; and in his first novel, *Cosmic Engineers* (1939), his time traveling Earthmen have to struggle with an godlike alien who is actually insane. And in one way or another, religion would appear, if only momentarily, in many other of his books and stories, including *Project Pope*, *A Choice of Gods*, *Time and Again*, *Time Is the Simplest Thing*, *Way Station*, *Mastodonia*, "Gleaners"—the list is long. (And yet, perhaps strangely, there seems to be no trace of such religious notions or influences in the well-known story-cycle known by its collective title, *City*.)

It should be made clear, however, that Clifford D. Simak, in his mentions of various "religious" ideas or practices, never really put forward any particular set of religious tenets beyond the suggestion, to which I referred earlier, that there might exist a universally applicable ethical code—indeed, Cliff, in his writing, is best described as agnostic.

But there was an idea that underlay most of Simak's mentions of religion, and it was an idea that went beyond religion, and indeed beyond his science fiction: It was an iconoclasm that also condemned such societal institutions as law enforcement, politicians, banking, and business: the idea that humans have a tendency to cheat their fellows, to use positions of power to tyrannize them.

Cliff's cynical view of religion, then, was not so much about the ideals of religion, of theology—as it was about the way humankind seems to always show a tendency to create "religious" organizations that are used to gain power or wealth for those "running" the organizations; he was unsparing in his depictions of churchmen supporting the rights of humans to take the land of nonhumans (*Enchanted Pilgrimage*); of "Bible Belt fanatics (*The Werewolf Principle*); of religious groups who sought to control time travel so as to be able to prevent others from learning the truth about the founding of Christianity (*Mastodonia*, "Gleaners"); of a "group of selfish, scheming leeches who fastened on the people" by creating a fraudulent religion during a time of societal privation (*Enchanted Pilgrimage*); of a monastery whose monks were "fat, lazy, and spongers off their neighbors (*Fellowship of the Talisman*);" of "professional religionists" who tried to manipulate a world-threatening crisis (*Our Children's Children*); or "churchmen … inclined to shoot off their mouths in all directions and endlessly and without thought on any given subject" (*The Visitors*).

Do not make the mistake of thinking that Cliff Simak was against all religion; rather, he was concerned to point out how easy it was—and how usual—for people to corrupt religious impulses and ideals. It is notable, for instance, that his most sympathetic portrayal of religious ideas, in "The Spaceman's Van Gogh," involved a wandering

artist who was pursuing a search for his religious ideal—that story, that search, had nothing to do with any ecclesiastical organization. (And if I may go out on a limb, I would suggest that "The Thing in the Stone" seems to hint at an alien version of Christianity's Good Shepherd story.)

Humans, Cliff Simak said a number of times, seem to have a strong need for faith. But they do not seem to know how to find it, or how to use it if they do. This, he suggested in *A Heritage of Stars*, resulted in great danger to humans—as an alien character said in that book: "you have always been susceptible to gods."

And let me close by noting that Cliff occasionally portrayed both aliens and robots as wanting to have souls, as humans do—in fact, those beings seemed to care more about having souls than did humans—almost as if humans, having souls, did not really appreciate them.

In particular, it is notable that in many of Cliff's stories featuring robots, his robots carried names that seem Biblical to us—was that to illustrate that robots, unlike humans, were religiously innocent? (The only religious person in "All the Traps of Earth," a minister approached by the robot protagonist for advice, was depicted as ineffectual, confused, and unwilling to commit on a moral issue.)

Humans, in Simak stories, usually seem to resent it when robots want to explore religious notions—in *Shakespeare's Planet*, for instance, the three human brains who are running an interstellar ship resent the desire of the robot Nicodemus to offer prayers for humans who died on the journey. Nicodemus was likely named after a figure in the New Testament, a Pharisee and a leader of the Jewish people in the time of Jesus Christ, who was also a member of the Sanhedrin, the high court in Israel—according to the Gospel of John, Nicodemus came to Jesus by night to try to learn if Jesus was the Messiah … in short, Nicodemus was a seeker after the truth.

David W. Wixon

The Thing in the Stone

Arguably the quintessential Simak story, "The Thing in the Stone," which first appeared in the March 1970 issue of If: Worlds of Science Fiction*, is exactly the sort a Simak fan of the author's time would want to see in any new work that came bearing Simak's name … for it is clear that most who treasured Cliff's works did not mind if he returned to themes he'd dealt with before; the readers came to see how Cliff phrased it, how he told the story—the next time.*

Simak's mind, like that of Daniels, spent much of his life simply looking at, or remembering, the land he loved. Cliff let that land come alive in his imagination, but Daniels could do more than that.

So, a mind that lived plainly and simply in a quiet, backwater place was able to listen to the emanations from other worlds … from the stars. But he also listened to his heart—and, somehow, he may have caught an echo of divine love.

—dww

I

He walked the hills and knew what the hills had seen through geologic time. He listened to the stars and spelled out what the stars were saying. He had found the creature that lay imprisoned in the stone. He had climbed the tree that in other days had been climbed by homing wildcats to reach the den gouged by time and weather out of the cliff's sheer face. He lived alone on a worn-out farm perched on a high and narrow ridge that overlooked the confluence of two rivers. And his next-door neighbor, a most ill-favored man, drove to the county seat, thirty miles away, to tell the sheriff that this reader of the hills, this listener to the stars was a chicken thief.

The sheriff dropped by within a week or so and walked across the yard to where the man was sitting in a rocking chair on a porch that faced the river hills. The sheriff came to a halt at the foot of the stairs that ran up to the porch.

"I'm Sheriff Harley Shepherd," he said. "I was just driving by. Been some years since I been out in this neck of the woods. You are new here, aren't you?"

The man rose to his feet and gestured at another chair. "Been here three years or so," he said. "The name is Wallace Daniels. Come

up and sit with me."

The sheriff climbed the stairs and the two shook hands, then sat down in the chairs.

"You don't farm the place," the sheriff said.

The weed-grown fields came up to the fence that hemmed in the yard.

Daniels shook his head. "Subsistence farming, if you can call it that. A few chickens for eggs. A couple of cows for milk and butter. Some hogs for meat—the neighbors help me butcher. A garden, of course, but that's about the story."

"Just as well," the sheriff said. "The place is all played out. Old Amos Williams, he let it go to ruin. He never was no farmer."

"The land is resting now," said Daniels. "Give it ten years—twenty might be better—and it will be ready once again. The only things it's good for now are the rabbits and the woodchucks and the meadow mice. A lot of birds, of course. I've got the finest covey of quail a man has ever seen."

"Used to be good squirrel country," said the sheriff. "Coon, too. I suppose you still have coon. You a hunter, Mr. Daniels?"

"I don't own a gun," said Daniels.

The sheriff settled deeply into the chair, rocking gently.

"Pretty country out here," he declared. "Especially with the leaves turning colors. A lot of hardwood and they are colorful. Rough as all hell, of course, this land of yours. Straight up and down, the most of it. But pretty."

"It's old country," Daniels said. "The last sea retreated from this area more than four hundred million years ago. It has stood as dry land since the end of the Silurian. Unless you go up north, onto the Canadian Shield, there aren't many places in this country you can find as old as this."

"You a geologist, Mr. Daniels?"

"Not really. Interested, is all. The rankest amateur. I need something to fill in my time and I do a lot of hiking, scrambling up and down these hills. And you can't do that without coming face to face with a lot of geology. I got interested. Found some fossil brachiopods and got to wondering about them. Sent off for some books and read up on them. One thing led to another and—"

"Brachiopods? Would they be dinosaurs, or what? I never knew there were dinosaurs out this way."

"Not dinosaurs," said Daniels. "Earlier than dinosaurs, at least the ones I found. They're small. Something like clams or oysters. But the shells are hinged in a different sort of way. These were old ones, extinct millions of years ago. But we still have a few brachiopods living now. Not too many of them."

“It must be interesting.”

“I find it so,” said Daniels.

“You knew old Amos Williams?”

“No. He was dead before I came here. Bought the land from the bank that was settling his estate.”

“Queer old coot,” the sheriff said. “Fought with all his neighbors. Especially with Ben Adams. Him and Ben had a line fence feud going on for years. Ben said Amos refused to keep up the fence. Amos claimed Ben knocked it down and then sort of, careless-like, hazed his cattle over into Amos’s hayfield. How you get along with Ben?”

“All right,” Daniels said. “No trouble. I scarcely know the man.”

“Ben don’t do much farming, either,” said the sheriff. “Hunts and fishes, hunts ginseng, does some trapping in the winter. Prospects for minerals now and then.”

“There are minerals in these hills,” said Daniels. “Lead and zinc. But it would cost more to get it out than it would be worth. At present prices, that is.”

“Ben always has some scheme cooking.” said the sheriff. “Always off on some wild goose chase. And he’s a pure pugnacious man. Always has his nose out of joint about something. Always on the prod for trouble. Bad man to have for an enemy. Was in the other day to say someone’s been lifting a hen or two of his. You haven’t been missing any, have you?”

Daniels grinned. “There’s a fox that levies a sort of tribute on the coop every now and then. I don’t begrudge them to him.”

“Funny thing,” the sheriff said. “There ain’t nothing can rile up a farmer like a little chicken stealing. It don’t amount to shucks, of course, but they get real hostile at it.”

“If Ben has been losing chickens,” Daniels said, “more than likely the culprit is my fox.”

“Your fox? You talk as if you own him.”

“Of course I don’t. No one owns a fox. But he lives in these hills with me. I figure we are neighbors. I see him every now and then and watch him. Maybe that means I own a piece of him. Although I wouldn’t be surprised if he watches me more than I watch him. He moves quicker than I do.”

The sheriff heaved himself out of the chair.

“I hate to go,” he said. “I declare it has been restful sitting here and talking with you and looking at the hills. You look at them a lot, I take it.”

“Quite a lot,” said Daniels.

He sat on the porch and watched the sheriff’s car top the rise far down the ridge and disappear from sight.

What had it all been about? he wondered. The sheriff hadn’t just

happened to be passing by. He'd been on an errand. All this aimless, friendly talk had not been for nothing and in the course of it he'd managed to ask lots of questions.

Something about Ben Adams, maybe? Except there wasn't too much against Adams except he was bone-lazy. Lazy in a weasely sort of way. Maybe the sheriff had gotten wind of Adams' off-and-on moonshining operation and was out to do some checking, hoping that some neighbor might misspeak himself. None of them would, of course, for it was none of their business, really, and the moonshining had built up no nuisance value. What little liquor Ben might make didn't amount to much. He was too lazy for anything he did to amount to much.

From far down the hill he heard the tinkle of a bell. The two cows were finally heading home. It must be much later, Daniels told himself, than he had thought. Not that he paid much attention to what time it was. He hadn't for long months on end, ever since he'd smashed his watch when he'd fallen off the ledge. He had never bothered to have the watch fixed. He didn't need a watch. There was a battered old alarm clock in the kitchen but it was an erratic piece of mechanism and not to be relied upon. He paid slight attention to it.

In a little while, he thought, he'd have to rouse himself and go and do the chores—milk the cows, feed the hogs and chickens, gather up the eggs. Since the garden had been laid by there hadn't been much to do. One of these days he'd have to bring in the squashes and store them in the cellar and there were those three or four big pumpkins he'd have to lug down the hollow to the Perkins kids, so they'd have them in time to make jack-o-lanterns for Hallowe'en. He wondered if he should carve out the faces himself or if the kids would rather do it on their own.

But the cows were still quite a distance away and he still had time. He sat easy in his chair and stared across the hills.

And they began to shift and change as he stared.

When he had first seen it, the phenomenon had scared him silly. But now he was used to it.

As he watched, the hills changed into different ones. Different vegetation and strange life stirred on them.

He saw dinosaurs this time. A herd of them, not very big ones. Middle Triassic, more than likely. And this time it was only a distant view—he, himself, was not to become involved. He would only see, from a distance, what ancient time was like and would not be thrust into the middle of it as most often was the case.

He was glad. There were chores to do.

Watching, he wondered once again what more he could do. It was not the dinosaurs that concerned him, nor the earlier amphibians, or

all the other creatures that moved in time about the hills.

What disturbed him was that other being that lay buried deep beneath the Platteville limestone.

Someone else should know about it. The knowledge of it should be kept alive so that in the days to come—perhaps in another hundred years—when man's technology had reached the point where it was possible to cope with such a problem, something could be done to contact—and perhaps to free—the dweller in the stone.

There would be a record, of course, a written record. He would see to that. Already that record was in progress—a week by week (at times a day to day) account of what he had seen, heard and learned. Three large record books now were filled with his careful writing and another one was well started. All written down as honestly and as carefully and as objectively as he could bring himself to do it.

But who would believe what he had written? More to the point, who would bother to look at it? More than likely the books would gather dust on some hidden shelf until the end of time with no human hand ever laid upon them. And even if someone, in some future time, should take them down and read them, first blowing away the accumulated dust, would he or she be likely to believe?

The answer lay clear. He must convince someone. Words written by a man long dead—and by a man of no reputation—could be easily dismissed as the product of a neurotic mind. But if some scientist of solid reputation could be made to listen, could be made to endorse the record, the events that paraded across the hills and lay within them could stand on solid ground, worthy of full investigation at some future date.

A biologist? Or a neuropsychiatrist? Or a paleontologist?

Perhaps it didn't matter what branch of science the man was in. Just so he'd listen without laughter. It was most important that he listen without laughter.

Sitting on the porch, staring at the hills dotted with grazing dinosaurs, the listener to the stars remembered the time he had gone to see the paleontologist.

"Ben," the sheriff said, "you're way out in left field. That Daniels fellow wouldn't steal no chickens. He's got chickens of his own."

"The question is," said Adams, "how did he get them chickens?"

"That makes no sense," the sheriff said. "He's a gentleman. You can tell that just by talking with him. An educated gentleman."

"If he's a gentleman," asked Adams, "what's he doing out here? This ain't no place for gentlemen. He showed up two or three years ago and moved out to this place. Since that day he hasn't done a tap of work. All he does is wander up and down the hills."

"He's a geologist," said the sheriff. "Or anyway interested in

geology. A sort of hobby with him. He tells me he looks for fossils."

Adams assumed the alert look of a dog that has sighted a rabbit. "So that is it," he said. "I bet you it ain't fossils he is looking for."

"No," the sheriff said.

"He's looking for minerals," said Adams. "He's prospecting, that's what he's doing. These hills crawl with minerals. All you have to do is know where to look."

"You've spent a lot of time looking," observed the sheriff.

"I ain't no geologist. A geologist would have a big advantage. He would know rocks and such."

"He didn't talk as if he were doing any prospecting. Just interested in the geology, is all. He found some fossil clams."

"He might be looking for treasure caves," said Adams. "He might have a map or something."

"You know damn well," the sheriff said, "there are no treasure caves."

"There must be," Adams insisted. "The French and Spanish were here in the early days. They were great ones for treasure, the French and Spanish. Always running after mines. Always hiding things in caves. There was that cave over across the river where they found a skeleton in Spanish armor and the skeleton of a bear beside him, with a rusty sword stuck into where the bear's gizzard was."

"That was just a story," said the sheriff, disgusted. "Some damn fool started it and there was nothing to it. Some people from the university came out and tried to run it down. It developed that there wasn't a word of truth in it."

"But Daniels has been messing around with caves," said Adams. "I've seen him. He spends a lot of time in that cave down on Cat Den Point. Got to climb a tree to get to it."

"You been watching him?"

"Sure I been watching him. He's up to something and I want to know what it is."

"Just be sure he doesn't catch you doing it," the sheriff said.

Adams chose to let the matter pass. "Well, anyhow," he said, "if there aren't any treasure caves, there's a lot of lead and zinc. The man who finds it is about to make a million."

"Not unless he can find the capital to back him," the sheriff pointed out.

Adams dug at the ground with his heel. "You think he's all right, do you?"

"He tells me he's been losing some chickens to a fox. More than likely that's what has been happening to yours."

"If a fox is taking his chickens," Adams asked, "why don't he shoot it?"

"He isn't sore about it. He seems to think the fox has got a right to. He hasn't even got a gun."

"Well, if he hasn't got a gun and doesn't care to hunt himself—then why won't he let other people hunt? He won't let me and my boys on his place with a gun. He has his place all posted. That seems to me to be unneighborly. That's one of the things that makes it so hard to get along with him. We've always hunted on that place. Old Amos wasn't an easy man to get along with but he never cared if we did some hunting. We've always hunted all around here. No one ever minded. Seems to me hunting should be free. Seems right for a man to hunt wherever he's a mind to."

Sitting on the bench on the hard-packed earth in front of the ramshackle house, the sheriff looked about him—at the listlessly scratching chickens, at the scrawny hound sleeping in the shade, its hide twitching against the few remaining flies, at the clothesline strung between two trees and loaded with drying clothes and dish towels, at the washtub balanced on its edge on a wash bench leaning against the side of the house.

Christ, he thought, the man should be able to find the time to put up a decent clothesline and not just string a rope between two trees.

"Ben," he said, "you're just trying to stir up trouble. You resent Daniels, a man living on a farm who doesn't work at farming, and you're sore because he won't let you hunt his land. He's got a right to live anywhere he wants to and he's got a right not to let you hunt. I'd lay off him if I were you. You don't have to like him, you don't have to have anything to do with him—but don't go around spreading fake accusations against the man. He could jerk you up in court for that."

II

He had walked into the paleontologist's office and it had taken him a moment finally to see the man seated toward the back of the room at a cluttered desk. The entire place was cluttered. There were long tables covered with chunks of rock with embedded fossils. Scattered here and there were stacks of papers. The room was large and badly lighted. It was a dingy and depressing place.

"Doctor?" Daniels had asked. "Are you Dr. Thorne?"

The man rose and deposited a pipe in a cluttered ashtray. He was big, burly, with graying hair that had a wild look to it. His face was seamed and weather-beaten. When he moved he shuffled like a bear.

"You must be Daniels," he said. "Yes, I see you must be. I had you on my calendar for three o'clock. So glad you could come."

His great paw engulfed Daniels' hand. He pointed to a chair

beside the desk, sat down and retrieved his pipe from the overflowing tray, began packing it from a large canister that stood on the desk.

"Your letter said you wanted to see me about something important," he said. "But then that's what they all say. But there must have been something about your letter—an urgency, a sincerity. I haven't the time, you understand, to see everyone who writes. All of them have found something, you see. What is it, Mr. Daniels, that you have found?"

Daniels said, "Doctor, I don't quite know how to start what I have to say. Perhaps it would be best to tell you first that something had happened to my brain."

Thorne was lighting his pipe. He talked around the stem. "In such a case, perhaps I am not the man you should be talking to. There are other people—"

"No, that's not what I mean," said Daniels. "I'm not seeking help. I am quite all right physically and mentally, too. About five years ago I was in a highway accident. My wife and daughter were killed and I was badly hurt and—"

"I am sorry, Mr. Daniels."

"Thank you—but that is all in the past. It was rough for a time but I muddled through it. That's not what I'm here for. I told you I was badly hurt—"

"Brain damage?"

"Only minor. Or so far as the medical findings are concerned. Very minor damage that seemed to clear up rather soon. The bad part was the crushed chest and punctured lung."

"But you're all right now?"

"As good as new," said Daniels. "But since the accident my brain's been different. As if I had new senses. I see things, understand things that seem impossible."

"You mean you have hallucinations?"

"Not hallucinations. I am sure of that. I can see the past."

"How do you mean—see the past?"

"Let me try to tell you," Daniels said, "exactly how it started. Several years ago I bought an abandoned farm in southwestern Wisconsin. A place to hole up in, a place to hide away. With my wife and daughter gone I still was recoiling from the world. I had gotten through the first brutal shock but I needed a place where I could lick my wounds. If this sounds like self-pity—I don't mean it that way. I am trying to be objective about why I acted as I did, why I bought the farm."

"Yes. I understand," said Thorne. "But I'm not entirely sure hiding was the wisest thing to do."

"Perhaps not, but it seemed to me the answer. It has worked out

rather well. I fell in love with the country. That part of Wisconsin is ancient land. It has stood uncovered by the sea for four hundred million years. For some reason it was not overridden by the Pleistocene glaciers. It has changed, of course, but only as the result of weathering. There have been no great geologic upheavals, no massive erosions—nothing to disturb it."

"Mr. Daniels," said Thorne, somewhat testily, "I don't quite see what all this has to do—"

"I'm sorry. I am just trying to lay the background for what I came to tell you. It came on rather slowly at first and I thought that I was crazy, that I was seeing things, that there had been more brain damage than had been apparent—or that I was finally cracking up. I did a lot of walking in the hills, you see. The country is wild and rugged and beautiful—a good place to be out in. The walking made me tired and I could sleep at night. But at times the hills changed. Only a little at first. Later on they changed more and finally they became places I had never seen before, that no one had ever seen before."

Thorne scowled. "You are trying to tell me they changed into the past."

Daniels nodded. "Strange vegetation, funny-looking trees. In the earlier times, of course, no grass at all. Underbrush of ferns and scouring rushes. Strange animals, strange things in the sky. Sabretooth cats and mastodons, pterosaurs and uintatheres and—"

"All at the same time?" Thorne asked, interrupting. "All mixed up?"

"Not at all. The time periods I see seem to be true time periods. Nothing out of place. I didn't know at first—but when I was able to convince myself that I was not hallucinating I sent away for books. I studied. I'll never be an expert, of course—never a geologist or paleontologist—but I learned enough to distinguish one period from another, to have some idea of what I was looking at."

Thorne took his pipe out of his mouth and perched it in the ash tray. He ran a massive hand through his wild hair.

"It's unbelievable," he said. "It simply couldn't happen. You said all this business came on rather slowly?"

"To begin with it was hazy, the past foggily imposed upon the present, then the present would slowly fade and the past came in, real and solid. But it's different now. Once in a while there's a bit of flickering as the present gives way to the past—but mostly it simply changes, as if at the snap of a finger. The present goes away and I'm standing in the past. The past is all around me. Nothing of the present is left."

"But you aren't really in the past? Physically, I mean."

"There are times when I'm not in it at all. I stand in the present and the distant hills or the river valley changes. But ordinarily it changes all around me, although the funny thing about it is that, as you say, I'm not really in it. I can see it and it seems real enough for me to walk around in it. I can walk over to a tree and put my hand out to feel it and the tree is there. But I seem to make no impact on the past. It's as if I were not there at all. The animals do not see me. I've walked up to within a few feet of dinosaurs. They can't see me or hear or smell me. If they had I'd have been dead a dozen times. It's as if I were walking through a three-dimensional movie. At first I worried a lot about the surface differences that might exist. I'd wake up dreaming of going into the past and being buried up to my waist in a rise of ground that since has eroded away. But it doesn't work that way. I'm walking along in the present and then I'm walking in the past. It's as if a door were there and I stepped through it. I told you I don't really seem to be in the past—but I'm not in the present, either. I tried to get some proof. I took a camera with me and shot a lot of pictures. When the films were developed there was nothing on them. Not the past—but what is more important, not the present, either. If I had been hallucinating, the camera should have caught pictures of the present. But apparently there was nothing there for the camera to take. I thought maybe the camera failed or I had the wrong kind of film. So I tried several cameras and different types of film and nothing happened. I got no pictures. I tried bringing something back. I picked flowers, after there were flowers. I had no trouble picking them but when I came back to the present I was empty-handed. I tried to bring back other things as well. I thought maybe it was only live things, like flowers, that I couldn't bring, so I tried inorganic things—like rocks—but I never was able to bring anything back."

"How about a sketch pad?"

"I thought of that but I never used one. I'm no good at sketching—besides, I figured, what was the use? The pad would come back blank."

"But you never tried."

"No," said Daniels. "I never tried. Occasionally I do make sketches after I get back to the present. Not every time but sometimes. From memory. But, as I said, I'm not very good at sketching."

"I don't know," said Thorne. "I don't really know. This all sounds incredible. But if there should be something to it—Tell me, were you ever frightened? You seem quite calm and matter-of-fact about it now, but at first you must have been frightened."

"At first," said Daniels, "I was petrified. Not only was I scared, physically scared—frightened for my safety, frightened that I'd fallen into a place from which I never could escape—but also afraid that I'd

gone insane. And there was the loneliness."

"What do you mean—loneliness?"

"Maybe that's not the right word. Out of place. I was where I had no right to be. Lost in a place where man had not as yet appeared and would not appear for millions of years. In a world so utterly alien that I wanted to hunker down and shiver. But I, not the place, was really the alien there. I still get some of that feeling every now and then. I know about it, of course, and am braced against it, but at times it still gets to me. I'm a stranger to the air and the light of that other time—it's all imagination, of course."

"Not necessarily," said Thorne.

"But the greatest fear is gone now, entirely gone. The fear I was insane. I am convinced now."

"How are you convinced? How could a man be convinced?"

"The animals. The creatures I see—"

"You mean you recognize them from the illustrations in those books you have been reading."

"No, not that. Not entirely that. Of course the pictures helped. But actually it's the other way around. Not the likenesses, but the differences. You see, none of the creatures are exactly like the pictures in the books. Some of them not at all like them. Not like the reconstruction the paleontologists put together. If they had been I might still have thought they were hallucinations, that what I was seeing was influenced by what I'd seen or read. I could have been feeding my imagination on prior knowledge. But since that was not the case, it seemed logical to assume that what I see is real. How could I imagine that Tyrannosaurus had dewlaps all the colors of the rainbow? How could I imagine that some of the sabretooths had tassels on their ears? How could anyone possibly imagine that the big thunder beasts of the Eocene had hides as colorful as giraffes?"

"Mr. Daniels," said Thorne, "I have great reservations about all that you have told me. Every fiber of my training rebels against it. I have a feeling that I should waste no time on it. Undoubtedly, you believe what you have told me. You have the look of an honest man about you. Have you talked to any other men about this? Any other paleontologists or geologists? Perhaps a neuropsychiatrist?"

"No," said Daniels. "You're the only person, the only man I have talked with. And I haven't told you all of it. This is really all just background."

"My God, man—just background?"

"Yes, just background. You see, I also listen to the stars."

Thorne got up from his chair, began shuffling together a stack of papers. He retrieved the dead pipe from the ash tray and stuck it in his mouth.

His voice, when he spoke, was noncommittal.

"Thank you for coming in," he said. "It's been most interesting."

III

And that was where he had made his mistake. Daniels told himself. He never should have mentioned listening to the stars. His interview had gone well until he had. Thorne had not believed him, of course, but he had been intrigued, would have listened further, might even have pursued the matter, although undoubtedly secretly and very cautiously.

At fault, Daniels knew, had been his obsession with the creature in the stone. The past was nothing—it was the creature in the stone that was important and to tell of it, to explain it and how he knew that it was there, he must tell about his listening to the stars.

He should have known better, he told himself. He should have held his tongue. But here had been a man who, while doubting, still had been willing to listen without laughter, and in his thankfulness Daniels had spoken too much.

The wick of the oil lamp set upon the kitchen table guttered in the air currents that came in around the edges of the ill-fitting windows. A wind had risen after chores were done and now shook the house with gale-like blasts. On the far side of the room the fire in the wood-burning stove threw friendly, wavering flares of light across the floor and the stovepipe, in response to the wind that swept the chimney top, made gurgling, sucking sounds.

Thorne had mentioned a neuropsychiatrist, Daniels remembered, and perhaps that was the kind of man he should have gone to see. Perhaps, before he attempted to interest anyone in what he could see or hear, he should make an effort to find out why and how he could hear and see these things. A man who studied the working of the brain and mind might come up with new answers—if answers were to be had.

Had that blow upon his head so rearranged, so shifted some process in his brain that he had gained new capabilities? Was it possible that his brain had been so jarred, so disarranged as to bring into play certain latent talents that possibly, in millennia to come, might have developed naturally by evolutionary means? Had the brain damage short-circuited evolution and given him—and him alone—these capabilities, these senses, perhaps a million years ahead of time?

It seemed—well, not reasonable but one possible explanation. Still, a trained man might have some other explanation.

He pushed his chair back from the table and walked over to the

stove. He used the lifter to raise the lid of the rickety old cook stove. The wood in the firebox had burned down to embers. Stooping, he picked up a stick of wood from the woodbox and fitted it in, added another smaller one and replaced the lid. One of these days soon, he told himself, he would have to get the furnace in shape for operation.

He went out to stand on the porch, looking toward the river hills. The wind whooped out of the north, whistling around the corners of the building and booming in the deep hollows that ran down to the river, but the sky was clear—steely clear, wiped fresh by the wind and sprinkled with stars, their light shivering in the raging atmosphere.

Looking up at the stars, he wondered what they might be saying but he didn't try to listen. It took a lot of effort and concentration to listen to the stars. He had first listened to them on a night like this, standing out here on the porch and wondering what they might be saying, wondering if the stars did talk among themselves. A foolish, vagrant thought, a wild, daydreaming sort of notion, but, voicing it, he had tried to listen, knowing even as he did that it was foolishness but glorying in his foolishness, telling himself how fortunate he was that he could afford to be so inane as to try to listen to the stars—as a child might believe in Santa Claus or the Easter Rabbit. He'd listened and he'd heard and while he'd been astonished, there could be no doubt about it, no doubt at all that out there somewhere other beings were talking back and forth. He might have been listening in on a party line, he thought, but a party line that carried millions, perhaps billions, of long-distance conversations. Not words, of course, but something (thought, perhaps) that was as plain as words. Not all of it understandable—much of it, as a matter of fact, not understandable—possibly because his background and his learning gave him no basis for an understanding. He compared himself to an Australian aborigine listening to the conversation of a couple of nuclear physicists discussing a new theory.

Shortly after that, when he had been exploring the shallow cave down on Cat Den Point, he had picked up his first indication of the creature buried in the stone. Perhaps, he thought, if he'd not listened to the stars, if he'd not known he could listen to the stars, if he'd not trained his mind by listening, he would not have heard the creature buried deep beneath the limestone.

He stood looking at the stars and listening to the wind and, far across the river, on a road that wound over the distant hills, he caught the faint glimmer of headlights as a car made its way through the night. The wind let up for a moment, as if gathering its strength to blow yet even harder and, in the tiny lull that existed before the wind took up again, he heard another sound—the sound of an axe hitting wood. He listened carefully and the sound came again but so tossed

about by the wind that he could not be sure of its direction.

He must be mistaken, he thought. No one would be out and chopping on a night like this. Coon hunters might be the answer. Coon hunters at times chopped down a tree to dislodge a prey too well hidden to be spotted. The unsportsmanlike trick was one that Ben Adams and his overgrown, gangling sons might engage in. But this was no night for coon hunting. The wind would blow away scent and the dogs would be unable to track. Quiet nights were the best for hunting coon. And no one would be insane enough to cut down a tree on a night like this when a swirling wind might catch it and topple it back upon the cutters.

He listened to catch the sound again but the wind, recovering from its lull, was blowing harder than ever now and there was no chance of hearing any sound smaller than the wind.

The next day came in mild and gray, the wind no more than a whisper. Once in the night Daniels had awoken to hear it rattling the windows, pounding at the house and howling mournfully in the tangled hollows that lay above the river. But when he woke again all was quiet and faint light was graying the windows. Dressed and out of doors he found a land of peace—the sky so overcast that there was no hint of sun, the air fresh, as if newly washed but heavy with the moist grayness that overlay the land. The autumn foliage that clothed the hills had taken on a richer luster than it had worn in the flooding autumn sunlight.

After chores and breakfast Daniels set out for the hills. As he went down the slope toward the head of the first hollow he found himself hoping that the geologic shift would not come about today. There were many times it didn't and there seemed to be no reason to its taking place or its failure to take place. He had tried at times to find some reason for it, had made careful notes of how he felt or what he did, even the course he took when he went for his daily walk, but he had found no pattern. It lay, of course, somewhere in his brain—something triggered into operation his new capability. But the phenomenon was random and involuntary. He had no control of it, no conscious control, at least. At times he had tried to use it, to bring the geologic shift about—in each case had failed. Either he did not know how to go about it or it was truly random.

Today, he hoped, his capability would not exercise its option, for he wanted to walk in the hills when they had assumed one of their most attractive moods, filled with gentle melancholy, all their harshness softened by the grayness of the atmosphere, the trees standing silently like old and patient friends waiting for one's coming, the fallen leaves and forest mold so hushed footfalls made no sound.

He went down to the head of the hollow and sat on a fallen log

beside a gushing spring that sent a stream of water tinkling down the boulder-strewn creek bed. Here, in May, in the pool below the spring, the marsh marigolds had bloomed and the sloping hillsides had been covered with the pastel of hepaticas. But now he saw no sign of either. The woods had battened down for winter. The summer and the autumn plants were either dead or dying, the drifting leaves interlocking on the forest floor to form cover against the ice and snow.

In this place, thought Daniels, a man walked with a season's ghosts. This was the way it had been for a million years or more, although not always. During many millions of years, in a time long gone, these hills and all the world had basked in an eternal summertime. And perhaps not a great deal more than ten thousand years before a mile-high wall of ice had reared up not too far to the north, perhaps close enough for a man who stood where his house now sat to have seen the faint line of blueness that would have been the top of that glacial barrier. But even then, although the mean temperature would have been lower, there had still been seasons.

Leaving the log, Daniels went on down the hollow, following the narrow path that looped along the hillside, a cow path beaten down at a time when there had been more cows at pasture in these woods than the two that Daniels owned. Following it, Daniels noted, as he had many times before, the excellent engineering sense of a cow. Cows always chose the easiest grade in stamping out their paths.

He stopped barely beyond the huge white oak that stood at a bend in the path, to have a look at the outsize jack-in-the-pulpit plant he had observed throughout the years. Its green-purple hood had withered away completely, leaving only the scarlet fruit cluster which in the bitter months ahead would serve as food for birds.

As the path continued, it plunged deeper between the hills and here the silence deepened and the grayness thickened until one's world became private.

There, across the stream bed, was the den. Its yellow maw gaped beneath a crippled, twisted cedar. There, in the spring, he had watched baby foxes play. From far down the hollow came the distant quacking of ducks upon the pond in the river valley. And up on the steep hillside loomed Cat Den Point, the den carved by slow-working wind and weather out of the sheer rock of the cliff.

But something was wrong.

Standing on the path and looking up the hill, he could sense the wrongness, although he could not at first tell exactly what it was. More of the cliff face was visible and something was missing. Suddenly he knew that the tree was no longer there—the tree that for years had been climbed by homing wildcats heading for the den after a night of prowling and later by humans like himself who wished to

seek out the wildcat's den. The cats, of course, were no longer there—had not been there for many years. In the pioneer days they had been hunted almost to extermination because at times they had exhibited the poor judgment of bringing down a lamb. But the evidence of their occupancy of the cave could still be found by anyone who looked. Far back in the narrow recesses of the shallow cave tiny bones and the fragmented skulls of small mammals gave notice of food brought home by the wildcats for their young.

The tree had been old and gnarled and had stood, perhaps, for several centuries and there would have been no sense of anyone's cutting it down, for it had no value as lumber, twisted as it was. And in any case to get it out of the woods would have been impossible. Yet, last night, when he had stepped out on the porch, he had seemed to hear in a lull in the wind the sound of chopping—and today the tree was gone.

Unbelieving, he scrambled up the slope as swiftly as he could. In places the slope of the wild hillside slanted at an angle so close to forty-five degrees that he went on hands and knees, clawing himself upward, driven by an illogical fear that had to do with more than simply a missing tree.

For it was in the cat den that one could hear the creature buried in the stone.

He could recall the day he first had heard the creature and on that day he had not believed his senses. For he had been sure the sound came from his own imagination, was born of his walking with the dinosaurs and eavesdropping on the stars. It had not come the first time he had climbed the tree to reach the cave-that-was-a-den. He had been there several times before, finding a perverse satisfaction at discovering so unlikely a retreat. He would sit on the ledge that ran before the cave and stare over the froth of treetop foliage that clothed the plunging hillside, but afforded a glimpse of the pond that lay in the flood plain of the river. He could not see the river itself—one must stand on higher ground to see the river.

He liked the cave and the ledge because it gave him seclusion, a place cut off from the world, where he still might see this restricted corner of the world but no one could see him. This same sense of being shut out from the world had appealed to the wildcats, he had told himself. And here, for them, not only was seclusion but safety—and especially safety for their young. There was no way the den could be approached other than by climbing the tree.

He had first heard the creature when he had crawled into the deepest part of the shallow cave to marvel at the little heaps of bones and small shattered skulls where the wildcat kittens, perhaps a century before, had crouched and snarled at feast. Crouching where

the baby wildcats once had crouched, he had felt the presence welling up at him, coming up to him from the depth of stone that lay far beneath him. Only the presence at first, only the knowing that something was down there. He had been skeptical at first, later on believing. In time belief had become solid certainty.

He could record no words, of course, for he had never heard any actual sound. But the intelligence and the knowing came creeping through his body, through his fingers spread flat upon the stone floor of the cave, through his knees, which also pressed the stone. He absorbed it without hearing and the more he absorbed the more he was convinced that deep in the limestone, buried in one of the strata, an intelligence was trapped. And finally the time came when he could catch fragments of thoughts—the edges of the *living* in the sentience encysted in the rock.

What he heard he did not understand. This very lack of understanding was significant. If he had understood he would have put his discovery down to his imagination. As matters stood he had no knowledge that could possibly have served as a springboard to imagine the thing of which he was made aware. He caught an awareness of tangled life relationships which made no sense at all—none of which could be understood, but which lay in tiny, tangled fragments of outrageous (yet simple) information no human mind could quite accept. And he was made to know the empty hollowness of distances so vast that the mind reeled at the very hint of them and of the naked emptiness in which those distances must lie. Even in his eavesdropping on the stars he had never experienced such devastating concepts of the other-where-and-when. There was other information, scraps and bits he sensed faintly that might fit into mankind's knowledge. But he never found enough to discover the proper slots for their insertion into the mass of mankind's knowledge. The greater part of what he sensed, however, was simply beyond his grasp and perhaps beyond the grasp of any human. But even so his mind would catch and hold it in all its incomprehensibility and it would lie there festering amid his human thoughts.

They were or it was, he knew, not trying to talk with him—undoubtedly they (or it) did not know that such a thing as a man existed, let alone himself. But whether the creature (or creatures—he found the collective singular easier) simply was thinking or might, in its loneliness, be talking to itself—or whether it might be trying to communicate with something other than himself, he could not determine.

Thinking about it, sitting on the ledge before the cave, he had tried to make some logic of his find, had tried to find a way in which the creature's presence might be best explained. And while he could

not be sure of it—in fact, had no data whatsoever to bolster his belief—he came to think that in some far geologic day when a shallow sea had lain upon this land, a ship from space had fallen into the sea to be buried deeply in the mud that in later millennia had hardened into limestone. In this manner the ship had become entrapped and so remained to this very day. He realized his reasoning held flaws—for one thing, the pressure involved in the fashioning of the stone must have been so great as to have crushed and flattened any ship unless it should be made of some material far beyond the range of man's technology.

Accident, he wondered, or a way of hiding? Trapped or planned? He had no way of knowing and further speculation was ridiculous, based as it necessarily must be upon earlier assumptions that were entirely without support.

Scrambling up the hillside, he finally reached the point where he could see that, in all truth, the tree had been cut down. It had fallen downhill and slid for thirty feet or so before it came to rest, its branches entangled with the trunks of other trees which had slowed its plunge. The stump stood raw, the whiteness of its wood shining in the grayness of the day. A deep cut had been made in the downhill side of it and the final felling had been accomplished by a saw. Little piles of brownish sawdust lay beside the stump. A two-man saw, he thought.

From where Daniels stood the hill slanted down at an abrupt angle but just ahead of him, just beyond the stump, was a curious mound that broke the hillside slope, In some earlier day, more than likely, great masses of stone had broken from the cliff face and piled up at its base, to be masked in time by the soil that came about from the forest litter. Atop the mound grew a clump of birch, their powdery white trunks looking like huddled ghosts against the darkness of the other trees.

The cutting of the tree, he told himself once again, had been a senseless piece of business. The tree was worthless and had served no particular purpose except as a road to reach the den, Had someone, he wondered, known that he used it to reach the den and cut it out of malice? Or had someone, perhaps, hidden something in the cave and then cut down the tree so there would be no way in which to reach it?

But who would hold him so much malice as to come out on a night raging with wind, working by lantern light, risking his life, to cut down the tree? Ben Adams? Ben was sore because Daniels would not permit hunting on his land but surely that was no sufficient reason for this rather laborious piece of petty spite.

The other alternative—that something hidden in the cave had caused the tree's destruction—seemed more likely, although the very

cutting of the tree would serve to advertise the strangeness of the place.

Daniels stood puzzled, shaking his head. Then he thought of a way to find out some answers. The day still was young and he had nothing else to do.

He started climbing up the hill, heading for his barn to pick up some rope.

IV

There was nothing in the cave. It was exactly as it had been before. A few autumn leaves had blown into the far corners. Chips of weathered stone had fallen from the rocky overhang, tiny evidences of the endless process of erosion which had formed the cave and in a few thousand years from now might wipe it out.

Standing on the narrow ledge in front of the cave, Daniels stared out across the valley and was surprised at the change of view that had resulted from the cutting of the tree. The angles of vision seemed somehow different and the hillside itself seemed changed. Startled, he examined the sweep of the slope closely and finally satisfied himself that all that had changed was his way of seeing it. He was seeing trees and contours that earlier had been masked.

His rope hung from the outcurving rock face that formed the roof of the cave. It was swaying gently in the wind and, watching it, Daniels recalled that earlier in the day he had felt no wind. But now one had sprung up from the west. Below him the treetops were bending to it.

He turned toward the west and felt the wind on his face and a breath of chill. The feel of the wind faintly disturbed him, rousing some atavistic warning that came down from the days when naked, roaming bands of proto-men had turned, as he turned now, to sniff the coming weather. The wind might mean that a change in weather could be coming and perhaps he should clamber up the rope and head back for the farm.

But he felt a strange reluctance to leave. It had been often so, he recalled. For here was a wild sort of refuge which barred out the world and the little world that it let in was a different kind—a more primal and more basic and less complicated world than the one he'd fled from.

A flight of mallards came winging up from the pond in the river valley, arrowing above the treetops, banking and slanting up the long curve of the bluff and then, having cleared the bluff top, wheeling gracefully back toward the flyer. He watched them until they dipped

down behind the trees that fringed the unseen river.

Now it was time to go. There was no use of waiting longer. It had been a fool's errand in the first place; he had been wrong to let himself think something might be hidden in the cave.

He turned back to the rope and the rope was gone.

For a moment he stared stupidly at the point along the cliff face where the rope had hung, swaying in the breeze. Then he searched for some sign of it, although there was little area to search. The rope could have slid, perhaps, for a short distance along the edge of the overhanging mass of rock but it seemed incredible that it could have slid far enough to have vanished from his sight.

The rope was new, strong, and he had tied it securely to the oak tree on the bluff above the cliff, snugging it tightly around the trunk and testing the knot to make certain that it would not slip.

And now the rope was gone. There had to be a human hand in this. Someone had come along, seen the rope and quietly drawn it up and now was crouched on the bluff above him, waiting for his frightened outburst when he found himself stranded. It was the sort of crude practical joke that any number of people in the community might believe to be the height of humor. The thing to do, of course, was to pay no attention, to remain quiet and wait until the joke would pall upon the jokester.

So he hunkered down upon the ledge and waited. Ten minutes, he told himself, or at least fifteen, would wear out the patience of the jokester. Then the rope would come down and he could climb up and go back to the house. Depending upon who the joker might turn out to be, he'd take him home and pour a drink for him and the two of them, sitting in the kitchen, would have a laugh together.

He found that he was hunching his shoulders against the wind, which seemed to have a sharper bite than when he first had noticed it. It was shifting from the west to north and that was no good.

Squatting on the ledge, he noticed that beads of moisture had gathered upon his jacket sleeve—not a result of rain, exactly, but of driven mist. If the temperature should drop a bit the weather might turn nasty.

He waited, huddled, listening for a sound—a scuffling of feet through leaves, the snap of broken brush—that would betray the presence of someone on the clifftop. But there was no sound at all. The day was muffled. Even the branches of the trees beneath his perch, swaying in the wind, swayed without their usual creaks and groans.

Fifteen minutes must have passed and there had been no sound from atop the cliff. The wind had increased somewhat and when he twisted his head to one side to try to look up he could feel the soft

slash of the driving mist against his cheek.

He could keep silent no longer in hope of waiting out the jokester. He sensed, in a sudden surge of panic, that time was running out on him.

"Hey, up there—" he shouted.

He waited and there was no response.

He shouted again, more loudly this time.

Ordinarily the cliff across the hollow should have bounced back echoes. But now there were no echoes and his shout seemed dampened, as if this wild place had erected some sort of fence to hem him in.

He shouted again and the misty world took his voice and swallowed it.

A hissing sound started. Daniels saw it was caused by tiny pellets of ice streaming through the branches of the trees. From one breath to another the driven mist had turned to ice.

He walked back and forth on the ledge in front of the cave, twenty feet at most, looking for some way of escape. The ledge went out into space and then sheered off. The slanting projection of rock came down from above. He was neatly trapped.

He moved back into the cave and hunkered down. Here he was protected from the wind and he felt, even through his rising panic, a certain sense of snugness. The cave was not yet cold. But the temperature must be dropping and dropping rather swiftly or the mist would not have turned to ice. He wore a light jacket and could not make a fire. He did not smoke and never carried matches.

For the first time he faced the real seriousness of his position. It might be days before anyone noticed he was missing. He had few visitors and no one had ever paid too much attention to him. Even if someone should find that he was missing and a hunt for him was launched, what were the chances that he would be found? Who would think to look in this hidden cave? How long, he wondered, could a man survive in cold and hunger?

If he could not get out of here, and soon, what about his livestock? The cows would be heading home from pasture, seeking shelter from the storm, and there would be no one there to let them into the barn. If they were not milked for a day or two they would be tormented by swollen udders. The hogs and chickens would go unfed. A man, he thought, had no right to take the kind of chance he had taken when so many living creatures were dependent on him.

He crawled farther back into the cave and stretched himself out on his belly, wedging himself into its deepest recess, an ear laid against the stone.

The creature still was there—of course it still was there. It was

trapped even more securely than himself, held down by, perhaps, several hundred feet of solid rock, which had been built up most deliberately through many millions of years.

It was remembering again. In its mind was another place and, while part of that flow of memory was blurred and wavy, the rest was starkly clear. A great dark plain of rock, one great slab of rock, ran to a far horizon and above that far horizon a reddish sun came up and limned against the great red ball of rising sun was a hinted structure—an irregularity of the horizon that suggested a place. A castle, perhaps, or a city or a great cliff dwelling—it was hard to make out what it was or to be absolutely sure that it was anything at all.

Home? Was that black expanse of rock the spaceport of the old home planet? Or might it be only a place the creature had visited before it had come to Earth? A place so fantastic, perhaps, that it lingered in the mind.

Other things mixed into the memory, sensory symbols that might have applied to personalities, life forms, smells, tastes. Although he could be wrong, Daniels knew, in supplying this entrapped creature with human sensory perceptions, these human sensory perceptions were the only ones he knew about.

And now, listening in on the memory of that flat black expanse of rock and imagining the rising sun which outlined the structure on the far horizon, Daniels did something he had never tried to do before. He tried to talk back to the buried creature, tried to let it know that someone was listening and had heard, that it was not as lonely and as isolated as it might have thought it was.

He did not talk with his tongue—that would have been a senseless thing to do. Sound could never carry through those many feet of stone. He talked with his mind instead.

Hello, down there, he said. *This is a friend of yours. I've been listening to you for a long, long time and I hope that you can hear me. If you can, let us talk together. Let me try to make you understand about myself and the world I live in and you tell me about yourself and the kind of world you lived in and how you came to be where you are and if there is anything I can do for you, any help that I can give …*

He said that much and no more. Having spoken, he continued lying with his ear against the hard cave floor, listening to find out if the creature might have heard him. But the creature apparently had not heard or, having heard, ignored him as something not worth its attention. It went on thinking about the place where the dull red sun was rising above the horizon.

It had been foolish, and perhaps presumptuous, he knew, for him to have tried to speak to it. He had never tried before; he had simply listened. And he had never tried, either, to speak to those others who

talked among the stars—again he'd simply listened.

What new dimension had been added to himself, he wondered, that would have permitted him to try to communicate with the creature? Had the possibility that he was about to die moved him?

The creature in the stone might not be subject to death—it might be immortal.

He crawled out of the far recess of the cave and crept out to where he had room to hunker down.

The storm had worsened. The ice now was mixed with snow and the temperature had fallen. The ledge in front of the cave was filmed with slippery ice. If a man tried to walk it he'd go plunging down the cliff face to his death.

The wind was blowing harder. The branches of the trees were waving and a storm of leaves was banking down the hillside, flying with the ice and snow.

From where he squatted he could see the topmost branches of the clump of birches which grew atop the mound just beyond where the cave tree had stood. And these branches, it seemed to him, were waving about far more violently than could be accounted for by wind. They were lashing wildly from one side to the other and even as he watched they seemed to rise higher in the air, as if the trees, in some great agony, were raising their branches far above their heads in a plea for mercy.

Daniels crept forward on his hands and knees and thrust his head out to see down to the base of the cliff.

Not only the topmost branches of the clump of birches were swaying but the entire clump seemed to be in motion, thrashing about as if some unseen hand were attempting to wrench it from the soil. But even as he thought this, he saw that the ground itself was in agitation, heaving up and out. It looked exactly as if someone had taken a time-lapse movie of the development of a frost boil with the film now being run at a normal speed. The ground was heaving up and the clump was heaving with it. A shower of gravel and other debris was flowing down the slope, loosened by the heaving of the ground. A boulder broke away and crashed down the hill, crushing brush and shrubs and leaving hideous scars.

Daniels watched in horrified fascination.

Was he witnessing, he wondered, some wonderfully speeded-up geological process? He tried to pinpoint exactly what kind of process it might be. He knew of one that seemed to fit. The mound kept on heaving upward, splintering outward from its center. A great flood of loose debris was now pouring down the slope, leaving a path of brown in the whiteness of the fallen snow. The clump of birch tipped over and went skidding down the slope and out of the place where it had

stood a shape emerged.

Not a solid shape, but a hazy one that looked as if someone had scraped some stardust from the sky and molded it into a ragged, shifting form that did not set into any definite pattern, that kept shifting and changing, although it did not entirely lose all resemblance to the shape in which it might originally have been molded. It looked as a loose conglomeration of atoms might look if atoms could be seen. It sparkled softly in the grayness of the day and despite its seeming insubstantiality it apparently had some strength—for it continued to push itself from the shattered mound until finally it stood free of it.

Having freed itself, it drifted up toward the ledge.

Strangely, Daniels felt no fear, only a vast curiosity. He tried to make out what the drifting shape was but he could not be sure.

As it reached the ledge and moved slightly above it he drew back to crouch within the cave. The shape drifted in a couple of feet or so and perched on the ledge—either perched upon it or floated just above it.

You spoke, the sparkling shape said to Daniels.

It was not a question, nor a statement either, really, and it was not really speaking. It sounded exactly like the talk Daniels had heard when he'd listened to the stars.

You spoke to it, said the shape, *as if you were a friend* (although the word was not friend but something else entirely, something warm and friendly). *You offered help to it. Is there help that you can give?*

That question at least was clear enough.

"I don't know," said Daniels. "Not right now, there isn't. But in a hundred years from now, perhaps—are you hearing me? Do you know what I am saying?"

You say there can be help, the creature said, *but only after time. Please, what is that time?*

"A hundred years," said Daniels. "When the planet goes around the star one hundred times."

One hundred? asked the creature.

Daniels held up the fingers of both hands. "Can you see my fingers? The appendages on the tips of my arms?"

See? the creature asked.

"Sense them. Count them."

Yes, I can count them.

"They number ten," said Daniels. "Ten times that many of them would be a hundred."

It is no great span of time, the creature said. *What kind of help by then?*

"You know genetics? How a creature comes into being, how it knows what kind of thing it is to become, how it grows, how it knows

how to grow and what to become. The amino acids that make up the ribonucleic acids and provide the key to the kind of cells it grows and what their functions are."

I do not know your terms, the creature said, *but I understand. So you know of this? You are not, then, a brute wild creature, like the other life that simply stands and the others that burrow in the ground and climb the standing life forms and run along the ground.*

It did not come out like this, of course. The words were there—or meanings that had the feel of words—but there were pictures as well of trees, of burrowing mice, of squirrels, of rabbits, of the lurching woodchuck and the running fox.

"Not I," said Daniels, "but others of my kind. I know but little of it. There are others who spend all their time in the study of it."

The other perched on the ledge and said nothing more. Beyond it the trees whipped in the wind and the snow came whirling down. Daniels huddled back from the ledge, shivered in the cold and wondered if this thing upon the ledge could be hallucination.

But as he thought it, the thing began to talk again, although this time it did not seem to be talking to him. It talked, rather, as the creature in the stone had talked, remembering. It communicated, perhaps, something he was not meant to know, but Daniels had no way of keeping from knowing. Sentience flowed from the creature and impacted on his mind, filling all his mind, barring all else, so that it seemed as if it were he and not this other who was remembering.

V

First there was space—endless, limitless space, so far from everything, so brutal, so frigid, so uncaring that it numbed the mind, not so much from fear or loneliness as from the realization that in this eternity of space the thing that was himself was dwarfed to an insignificance no yardstick could measure. So far from home, so lost, so directionless—and yet not entirely directionless, for there was a trace, a scent, a spoor, a knowing that could not be expressed or understood or even guessed at in the framework of humanity; a trace, a scent, a spoor that showed the way, no matter how dimly or how hopelessly, that something else had taken at some other time. And a mindless determination, an unflagging devotion, a primal urgency that drove him on that faint, dim trail, to follow where it might lead, even to the end of time or space, or the both of them together, never to fail or quit or falter until the trail had finally reached an end or had been wiped out by whatever winds might blow through empty space.

There was something here, Daniels told himself, that, for all its

alienness, still was familiar, a factor that should lend itself to translation into human terms and thus establish some sort of link between this remembering alien mind and his human mind.

The emptiness and the silence, the cold uncaring went on and on and on and there seemed no end to it. But he came to understand there had to be an end to it and that the end was here, in these tangled hills above the ancient river. And after the almost endless time of darkness and uncaring, another almost endless time of waiting, of having reached the end, of having gone as far as one might go and then settling down to wait with an ageless patience that never would grow weary.

You spoke of help, the creature said to him. *Why help? You do not know this other. Why should you want to help?*

"It is alive," said Daniels. "It's alive and I'm alive and is that not enough?"

I do not know, the creature said.

"I think it is," said Daniels.

And how could you help?

"I've told you about this business of genetics. I don't know if I can explain—"

I have the terms from your mind, the creature said. *The genetic code.*

"Would this other one, the one beneath the stone, the one you guard—"

Not guard, the creature said. *The one I wait for.*

"You will wait for long."

I am equipped for waiting. I have waited long. I can wait much longer.

"Someday," Daniels said, "the stone will erode away. But you need not wait that long. Does this other creature know its genetic code?"

It knows, the creature said. *It knows far more than I.*

"But all of it," insisted Daniels. "Down to the last linkage, the final ingredient, the sequences of all the billions of—"

It knows, the creature said. *The first requisite of all life is to understand itself.*

"And it could—it would—be willing to give us that information, to supply us its genetic code?"

You are presumptuous, said the sparkling creature (although the word was harsher than presumptuous). *That is information no thing gives another. It is indecent and obscene* (here again the words were not exactly indecent and obscene). *It involves the giving of one's self into another's hands. It is an ultimate and purposeless surrender.*

"Not surrender," Daniels said. "A way of escaping from its imprisonment. In time, in the hundred years of which I told you, the people of my race could take that genetic code and construct another

creature exactly like the first. Duplicate it with exact preciseness."

But it still would be in stone.

"Only one of it. The original one. That original could wait for the erosion of the rock. But the other one, its duplicate, could take up life again."

And what, Daniels wondered, if the creature in the stone did not wish for rescue? What if it had deliberately placed itself beneath the stone? What if it simply sought protection and sanctuary? Perhaps, if it wished, the creature could get out of where it was as easily as this other one—or this other thing—had risen from the mound.

No, it cannot, said the creature squatting on the ledge. *I was careless. I went to sleep while waiting and I slept too long.*

And that would have been a long sleep, Daniels told himself. A sleep so long that dribbling soil had mounded over it, that fallen boulders, cracked off the cliff by frost, had been buried in the soil and that a clump of birch had sprouted and grown into trees thirty feet high. There was a difference here in time rate that he could not comprehend.

But some of the rest, he told himself, he had sensed—the devoted loyalty and the mindless patience of the creature that tracked another far among the stars. He knew he was right, for the mind of that other thing, that devoted star-dog perched upon the ledge, came into him and fastened on his mind and for a moment the two of them, the two minds, for all their differences, merged into a single mind in a gesture of fellowship and basic understanding, as if for the first time in what must have been millions of years this baying hound from outer space had found a creature that could understand its duty and its purpose.

"We could try to dig it out," said Daniels. "I had thought of that, of course, but I was afraid that it would be injured. And it would be hard to convince anyone—"

No, said the creature, *digging would not do. There is much you do not understand. But this other proposal that you have, that has great merit. You say you do not have the knowledge of genetics to take this action now. Have you talked to others of your kind?*

"I talked to one," said Daniels, "and he would not listen. He thought I was mad. But he was not, after all, the man I should have spoken to. In time I could talk with others but not right now. No matter how much I might want to—I can't. For they would laugh at me and I could not stand their laughter. But in a hundred years or somewhat less I could—"

But you will not exist a hundred years, said the faithful dog. *You are a short-lived species. Which might explain your rapid rise. All life here is short-lived and that gives evolution a chance to build intelligence. When I first came here I found but mindless entities.*

"You are right," said Daniels. "I can live no hundred years. Even from the very start, I could not live a hundred years, and better than half of my life is gone. Perhaps much more than half of it. For unless I can get out of this cave I will be dead in days."

Reach out, said the sparkling one. *Reach out and touch me, being.*

Slowly Daniels reached out. His hand went through the sparkle and the shine and he had no sense of matter—it was as if he'd moved his hand through nothing but air.

You see, the creature said, *I cannot help you. There is no way for our energies to interact. I am sorry, friend.* (it was not friend, exactly, but it was good enough, and it might have been, Daniels thought, a great deal more than friend.)

"I am sorry, too," said Daniels. "I would like to live."

Silence fell between them, the soft and brooding silence of a snow-laden afternoon with nothing but the trees and the rock and the hidden little life to share the silence with them.

It had been for nothing, then, Daniels told himself, this meeting with a creature from another world. Unless he could somehow get off this ledge there was nothing he could do. Although why he should so concern himself with the rescue of the creature in the stone he could not understand. Surely whether he himself lived or died should be of more importance to him than that his death would foreclose any chance of help to the buried alien.

"But it may not be for nothing," he told the sparkling creature. "Now that you know—"

My knowing, said the creature, *will have no effect. There are others from the stars who would have the knowledge—but even if I could contact them they would pay no attention to me. My position is too lowly to converse with the greater ones. My only hope would be people of your kind and, if I'm not mistaken, only with yourself. For I catch the edge of thought that you are the only one who really understands. There is no other of your race who could even be aware of me.*

Daniels nodded. It was entirely true. No other human existed whose brain had been jumbled so fortunately as to have acquired the abilities he held. He was the only hope for the creature in the stone and even such hope as he represented might be very slight, for before it could be made effective he must find someone who would listen and believe. And that belief must reach across the years to a time when genetic engineering was considerably advanced beyond its present state.

If you could manage to survive the present crisis, said the hound from outer space, *I might bring to bear certain energies and techniques—sufficiently for the project to be carried through. But, as you must realize, I cannot supply the means to survive this crisis.*

“Someone may come along,” said Daniels. “They might hear me if I yelled every now and then.”

He began yelling every now and then and received no answer. His yells were muffled by the storm and it was unlikely, he knew, that there would be men abroad at a time like this. They’d be safe beside their fires.

The sparkling creature still perched upon the ledge when Daniels slumped back to rest. The other made an indefinite sort of shape that seemed much like a lopsided Christmas tree standing in the snow.

Daniels told himself not to go to sleep. He must close his eyes only for a moment, then snap them open—he must not let them stay shut for then sleep would come upon him. He should beat his arms across his chest for warmth—but his arms were heavy and did not want to work.

He felt himself sliding prone to the cave floor and fought to drive himself erect. But his will to fight was thin and the rock was comfortable. So comfortable, he thought, that he could afford a moment’s rest before forcing himself erect. And the funny thing about it was that the cave floor had turned to mud and water and the sun was shining and he seemed warm again.

He rose with a start and he saw that he was standing in a wide expanse of water no deeper than his ankles, black ooze underfoot.

There was no cave and no hill in which the cave might be. There was simply this vast sheet of water and behind him, less than thirty feet away, the muddy beach of a tiny island—a muddy, rocky island, with smears of sickly green clinging to the rocks.

He was in another time, he knew, but not in another place. Always when he slipped through time he came to rest on exactly the same spot upon the surface of the earth that he had occupied when the change had come.

And standing there he wondered once again, as he had many times before, what strange mechanism operated to shift him bodily in space so that when he was transported to a time other than his own he did not find himself buried under, say, twenty feet of rock or soil or suspended twenty feet above the surface.

But now, he knew, was no time to think or wonder. By a strange quirk of circumstance he was no longer in the cave and it made good sense to get away from where he was as swiftly as he could. For if he stayed standing where he was he might snap back unexpectedly to his present and find himself still huddled in the cave.

He turned clumsily about, his feet tangling in the muddy bottom, and lunged towards the shore. The going was hard but he made it and went up the slimy stretch of muddy beach until he could reach the tumbled rocks and could sit and rest.

His breathing was difficult. He gulped great lungfuls and the air had a strange taste to it, not like normal air.

He sat on the rock, gasping for breath, and gazed out across the sheet of water shining in the high, warm sun. Far out he caught sight of a long, humping swell and watched it coming in. When it reached the shore it washed up the muddy incline almost to his feet. Far out on the glassy surface another swell was forming.

The sheet of water was greater, he realized, than he had first imagined. This was also the first time in his wanderings through the past that he had ever come upon any large body of water. Always before he had emerged on dry land whose general contours had been recognizable—and there had always been the river flowing through the hills.

Here nothing was recognizable. This was a totally different place and there could be no question that he had been projected farther back in time than ever before—back to the day of some great epicontinental sea, back to a time, perhaps, when the atmosphere had far less oxygen than it would have in later eons. More than likely, he thought, he was very close in time to that boundary line where life for a creature such as he would be impossible. Here there apparently was sufficient oxygen, although a man must pump more air into his lungs than he would normally. Go back a few million years and the oxygen might fall to the point where it would be insufficient. Go a little farther back and find no free oxygen at all.

Watching the beach, he saw the little things skittering back and forth, seeking refuge in spume-whitened piles of drift or popping into tiny burrows. He put his hand down on the rock on which he sat and scrubbed gently at a patch of green. It slid off the rock and clung to his flesh, smearing his palm with a slimy gelatinous mess that felt disgusting and unclean.

Here, then, was the first of life to dwell upon the land—scarcely creatures as yet, still clinging to the edge of water, afraid and unequipped to wander too far from the side of that wet and gentle mother which, from the first beginning, had nurtured life. Even the plants still clung close to the sea, existing, perhaps, only upon rocky surfaces so close to the beach that occasional spray could reach them.

Daniels found that now he did not have to gasp quite so much for breath. Plowing through the mud up to the rock had been exhausting work in an oxygen-poor atmosphere. But sitting quietly on the rock, he could get along all right.

Now that the blood had stopped pounding in his head he became aware of silence. He heard one sound only, the soft lapping of the water against the muddy beach, a lonely effect that seemed to emphasize rather than break the silence.

Never before in his life, he realized, had he heard so little sound. Back in the other worlds he had known there had been not one noise, but many, even on the quietest days. But here there was nothing to make a sound—no trees, no animals, no insects, no birds—just the water running to the far horizon and the bright sun in the sky.

For the first time in many months he knew again that sense of out-of-placeness, of not belonging, the feeling of being where he was not wanted and had no right to be, an intruder in a world that was out of bounds, not for him alone but for anything that was more complex or more sophisticated than the little skitterers on the beach.

He sat beneath the alien sun, surrounded by the alien water, watching the little things that in eons yet to come would give rise to such creatures as himself, and tried to feel some sort of kinship to the skitterers. But he could feel no kinship.

And suddenly in this place of one-sound-only there came a throbbing, faint but clear and presently louder, pressing down against the water, beating at the little island—a sound out of the sky.

Daniels leaped to his feet and looked up and the ship was there, plummeting down toward him. But not a ship of solid form, it seemed—rather a distorted thing, as if many planes of light (if there could be such things as planes of light) had been slapped together in a haphazard sort of way.

A throbbing came from it that set the atmosphere to howling and the planes of light kept changing shape or changing places, so that the ship, from one moment to the next, never looked the same.

It had been dropping fast to start with but now it was slowing down as it continued to fall, ponderously and with massive deliberation, straight toward the island.

Daniels found himself crouching, unable to jerk his eyes and senses away from this mass of light and thunder that came out of the sky.

The sea and mud and rock, even in the full light of the sun, were flickering with the flashing that came from the shifting of the planes of light. Watching it through eyes squinted against the flashes, Daniels saw that if the ship were to drop to the surface it would not drop upon the island, as he first had feared, but a hundred feet or so offshore.

Not more than fifty feet above the water the great ship stopped and hovered and a bright thing came from it. The object hit the water with a splash but did not go under, coming to rest upon the shallow, muddy bottom of the sea, with a bit less than half of it above the surface. It was a sphere, a bright and shiny globe against which the water lapped, and even with the thunder of the ship beating at his ears, Daniels imagined he could hear the water lapping at the sphere.

Then a voice spoke above this empty world, above the throbbing

of the ship, the imagined lapping sound of water, a sad, judicial voice —although it could not have been a voice, for any voice would have been too puny to be heard. But the words were there and there was no doubt of what they said:

Thus, according to the verdict and the sentence, you are here deported and abandoned upon this barren planet, where it is most devoutly hoped you will find the time and opportunity to contemplate your sins and especially the sin of (and here were words and concepts Daniels could not understand, hearing them only as a blur of sound — but the sound of them, or something in the sound of them, was such as to turn his blood to ice and at the same time fill him with a disgust and a loathing such as he'd never known before). *It is regrettable, perhaps, that you are immune to death, for much as we might detest ourselves for doing it, it would be a kinder course to discontinue you and would serve better than this course to exact our purpose, which is to place you beyond all possibility of ever having contact with any sort of life again. Here, beyond the farthest track of galactic intercourse, on this uncharted planet, we can only hope that our purpose will be served. And we urge upon you such self-examination that if, by some remote chance, in some unguessed time, you should be freed through ignorance or malice, you shall find it within yourself so to conduct your existence as not to meet or merit such fate again. And now, according to our law, you may speak any final words you wish.*

The voice ceased and after a while came another. And while the terminology was somewhat more involved than Daniels could grasp their idiom translated easily into human terms.

Go screw yourself, it said.

The throbbing deepened and the ship began to move straight up into the sky. Daniels watched it until the thunder died and the ship itself was a fading twinkle in the blue.

He rose from his crouch and stood erect, trembling and weak. Groping behind him for the rock, he found it and sat down again.

Once again the only sound was the lapping of the water on the shore. He could not hear, as he had imagined that he could, the water against the shining sphere that lay a hundred feet offshore. The sun blazed down out of the sky and glinted on the sphere and Daniels found that once again he was gasping for his breath.

Without a doubt, out there in the shallow water, on the mudbank that sloped up to the island, lay the creature in the stone. And how then had it been possible for him to be transported across the hundreds of millions of years to this one microsecond of time that held the answer to all the questions he had asked about the intelligence beneath the limestone? It could not have been sheer coincidence, for this was coincidence of too large an order ever to

come about. Had he somehow, subconsciously, gained more knowledge than he had been aware of from the twinkling creature that had perched upon the ledge? For a moment, he remembered, their minds had met and mingled—at that moment had there occurred a transmission of knowledge, unrecognized, buried in some subconscious corner of himself? Or was he witnessing the operation of some sort of psychic warning system set up to scare off any future intelligence that might be tempted to liberate this abandoned and marooned being?

And what about the twinkling creature? Could some hidden, unguessed good exist in the thing imprisoned in the sphere—for it to have commanded the loyalty and devotion of the creature on the ledge beyond the slow erosion of geologic ages? The question raised another: What were good and evil? Who was there to judge?

The evidence of the twinkling creature was, of course, no evidence at all. No human being was so utterly depraved that he could not hope to find a dog to follow him and guard him even to the death.

More to wonder at was what had happened within his own jumbled brain that could send him so unerringly to the moment of a vital happening. What more would he find in it to astonish and confound him? How far along the path to ultimate understanding might it drive him? And what was the purpose of that driving?

He sat on the rock and gasped for breath. The sea lay flat and calm beneath the blazing sun, its only motion the long swells running in to break around the sphere and on the beach. The little skittering creatures ran along the mud and he rubbed his palm against his trouser leg, trying to brush off the green and slimy scum.

He could wade out, he thought, and have a closer look at the sphere lying in the mud. But it would be a long walk in such an atmosphere and he could not chance it—for he must be nowhere near the cave up in that distant future when he popped back to his present.

Once the excitement of knowing where he was, the sense of out-of-placeness, had worn off, this tiny mud-flat island was a boring place. There was nothing but the sky and sea and the muddy beach; there was nothing much to look at. It was a place, he thought, where nothing ever happened, or was about to happen once the ship had gone away and the great event had ended. Much was going on, of course, that in future ages would spell out to quite a lot—but it was mostly happening out of sight, down at the bottom of this shallow sea. The skittering things, he thought, and the slimy growth upon the rock were hardy, mindless pioneers of this distant day—awesome to look upon and think about but actually not too interesting.

He began drawing aimless patterns in the mud with the toe of one boot. He tried to make a tic-tac-toe layout but so much mud was

clinging to his toe that it didn't quite come out.

And then, instead of drawing in the mud, he was scraping with his toe in fallen leaves, stiff with frozen sleet and snow.

The sun was gone and the scene was dark except for a glow from something in the woods just down the hill from him. Driving sheets of snow swirled into his face and he shivered. He pulled his jacket close about him and began to button it. A man, he thought, could catch his death of cold this way, shifting as quickly as he had shifted from a steaming mudbank to the whiplash chill of a northern blizzard.

The yellow glow still persisted on the slope below him and he could hear the sound of human voices. What was going on? He was fairly certain of where he was, a hundred feet or so above the place where the cliff began—there should be no one down there; there should not be a light.

He took a slow step down the hill, then hesitated. He ought not to be going down the hill—he should be heading straight for home. The cattle would be waiting at the barnyard gate, hunched against the storm, their coats covered with ice and snow, yearning for the warmth and shelter of the barn. The pigs would not have been fed, nor the chickens either. A man owed some consideration to his livestock.

But someone was down there, someone with a lantern, almost on the lip of the cliff. If the damn fools didn't watch out, they could slip and go plunging down into a hundred feet of space. Coon hunters more than likely, although this was not the kind of night to be out hunting coon. The coons would all be denned up.

But whoever they might be, he should go down and warn them.

He was halfway to the lantern, which appeared to be setting on the ground, when someone picked it up and held it high and Daniels saw and recognized the face of the man who held it.

Daniels hurried forward.

"Sheriff, what are you doing here?"

But he had the shamed feeling that he knew, that he should have known from the moment he had seen the light.

"Who is there?" the sheriff asked, wheeling swiftly and tilting the lantern so that its rays were thrown in Daniels' direction. "Daniels," he gasped. "Good God, man, where have you been?"

"Just walking around," said Daniels weakly. The answer, he knew, was no good at all—but how could he tell anyone that he had just returned from a trip through time?

"Damn it," the sheriff said, disgusted. "We've been hunting you. Ben Adams got scared when he dropped over to your place and you weren't there. He knows how you go walking around in the woods and he was afraid something had happened to you. So he phoned me, and he and his boys began looking for you. We were afraid you had

fallen or had been hurt somehow. A man wouldn't last the night in a storm like this."

"Where is Ben now?" asked Daniels.

The sheriff gestured down the hill and Daniels saw that two men, probably Adams' sons, had a rope snubbed around a tree and that the rope extended down over the cliff.

"He's down on the rope," the sheriff said. "Having a look in the cave. He felt somehow you might be in the cave."

"He had good reason to—" Daniels started to say, but he had barely begun to speak when the night was rent by a shriek of terror. The shrieking did not stop. It kept on and on. The sheriff thrust the lantern at Daniels and hurried forward.

No guts, Daniels thought. A man who could be vicious enough to set up another for death, to trap him in a cave—but who, when the chips were down, could not go through with it and had to phone the sheriff to provide a witness to his good intentions—a man like that lacked guts.

The shrieks had fallen to moaning. The sheriff hauled on the rope, helped by one of Adams' sons. A man's head and shoulders appeared above the clifftop and the sheriff reached out and hauled him to safety.

Ben Adams collapsed on the ground and never stopped his moaning. The sheriff jerked him to his feet.

"What's the matter, Ben?"

"There's something down there," Adams screamed. "There is something in the cave—"

"Something, damn it? What would it be? A cat? A panther?"

"I never seen it. I just knew that it was there. I felt it. It was crouched back inside the cave."

"How could anything be in there? Someone cut down the tree. How could anything get into the cave?"

"I don't know," howled Adams. "It might have been in there when the tree was cut. It might have been trapped in there."

One of the sons was holding Ben erect and the sheriff moved away. The other son was pulling in the rope and neatly coiling it.

"Another thing," the sheriff said, "how come you thought Daniels might be in that cave? If the tree was cut down he couldn't have climbed the tree. And he couldn't have used a rope the way you did, for there wasn't any rope. If he had used a rope it would still have been there. I don't know what's going on—damned if I do. You down messing in that cave and Daniels comes walking out of the woods. I wish someone would tell me."

Adams, who had been hobbling forward, saw Daniels for the first time and came to a sudden halt.

“Where did you come from?” he demanded. “Here we been wearing out our guts trying to hunt you down and then—”

“Oh, go on home,” the sheriff said in a disgusted tone of voice. “There’s a fishy smell to this. It’s going to take me a little while to get it figured out.”

Daniels reached out his hand to the son who had finished coiling the rope.

“I believe that’s my rope,” he said.

Without protest, taken by surprise, the boy handed it to him.

“We’ll cut across the woods,” said Ben. “Home’s closer that way.”

“Good night, men,” the sheriff said.

Slowly the sheriff and Daniels climbed the hill.

“Daniels,” said the sheriff, “you were never out walking in this storm. If you had been you’d have had a whole lot more snow on you than shows. You look like you just stepped from a house.”

“Maybe I wasn’t exactly walking around,” Daniels said.

“Would you mind telling me where you were? I don’t mind doing my duty as I see it but I don’t relish being made to look a fool while I’m doing it.”

“Sheriff, I can’t tell you. I’m sorry. I simply cannot tell you.”

“All right, then. What about the rope?”

“It’s my rope,” said Daniels. “I lost it this afternoon.”

“And I suppose you can’t tell me about that, either.”

“No, I guess I can’t.”

“You know,” the sheriff said, “I’ve had a lot of trouble with Ben Adams through the years. I’d hate to think I was going to have trouble with you, too.”

They climbed the hill and walked up to the house. The sheriff’s car was parked out on the road.

“Would you come in?” asked Daniels. “I could find a drink.”

The sheriff shook his head. “Some other time,” he said. “Maybe soon. You figure there was something in that cave? Or was it just Ben’s imagination? He’s a flighty sort of critter.”

“Maybe there wasn’t anything,”’ said Daniels, “but if Ben thought there was, what difference does it make? Thinking it might be just as real as if there were something there. All of us, sheriff, live with things walking by our sides no one else can see.”

The sheriff shot a quick glance at him. “Daniels, what’s with you?” he asked. “What is walking by your side or sniffing at your heels? Why did you bury yourself out here in this God-forsaken place? What is going on?”

He didn’t wait for an answer. He got into his car, started it and headed down the road.

Daniels stood in the storm and watched the glowing taillights

vanish in the murk of flying snow. He shook his head in bewilderment. The sheriff had asked a question and then had not waited for the answer. Perhaps because it was a question to which he did not want an answer.

Daniels turned and went up the snowy path to the house. He'd like some coffee and a bite to eat—but first he had to do the chores. He had to milk the cows and feed the pigs. The chickens must wait till morning—it was too late to feed the chickens. The cows would be waiting at the barn door. They had waited for a long time and it was not right to make them wait.

He opened the door and stepped into the kitchen.

Someone was waiting for him. It sat on the table or floated so close above it that it seemed to be sitting. The fire in the stove had gone out and the room was dark but the creature sparkled.

You saw? the creature asked.

"Yes," said Daniels. "I saw and heard. I don't know what to do. What is right or wrong? Who knows what's right or wrong?"

Not you, the creature said. *Not I. I can only wait. I can only keep the faith.*

Perhaps among the stars, thought Daniels, might be those who did know. Perhaps by listening to the stars, perhaps by trying to break in on their conversations and by asking questions, he might get an answer. Certainly there must be some universal ethics. A list, perhaps, of Universal Commandments. Maybe not ten of them. Maybe only two or three—but any number might be enough.

"I can't stay and talk," he said. "I have animals to take care of. Could you stick around? Later we can talk."

He fumbled for the lantern on the bench against the wall, found the matches on the shelf. He lit the lantern and its feeble flame made a puddle of light in the darkness of the room.

You have others to take care of? asked the creature. *Others not quite like yourself? Others, trusting you, without your intelligence?*

"I guess you could say it that way," Daniels said, "I've never heard it put quite that way before."

Could I go along with you? the creature asked. *It occurs to me, just now, that in many ways we are very much alike.*

"Very much—" But with the sentence hanging in the air, Daniels stopped.

Not a hound, he told himself. Not the faithful dog. But the shepherd. Could that be it? Not the master but the long-lost lamb?

He reached out a hand toward the creature in a swift gesture of understanding, then pulled it back, remembering it was nothing he could touch.

He lifted the lantern and turned toward the door.

“Come along,” he said.

Together the two of them went through the storm toward the barn and the waiting cows.

The World of the Red Sun

This story, which accidentally turned out to be the first published of Clifford D. Simak's stories, was clearly strongly influenced by H. G. Wells' The Time Machine. *But in turn, "World of the Red Sun" would have a strong influence on Simak's "The Creator," which, written only a couple of years later, would soon be regarded as one of the most iconoclastic works of early science fiction. And it turned out, too, to contain the seeds of ideas the young author would revive again and again, including time travel, false religion, and a dying Earth.*

"The World of the Red Sun" was initially sent to Astounding *(then a very different magazine from the genre-leader it would later become under the editorship of John W. Campbell Jr.) But that older* Astounding *rejected the story, and Cliff sent it to* Wonder Stories*, the magazine being run by the legendary Hugo Gernsback, and it would appear—as Simak's first published story—in the December 1931 issue.*

—dww

CHAPTER I

"Ready, Bill?" asked Harl Swanson.

Bill Kressman nodded.

"Then kiss 1935 good-bye!" cried the giant Swede, and swung over the lever.

The machine quivered violently, then hung motionless in pitch blackness. In the snap of a finger the bright sunlight was blotted out and a total darkness, a darkness painted with the devil's brush, rushed in upon the two men.

Electric lights glowed above the instrument boards, but their illumination was feeble against the utter blackness which crowded in upon the quartz windows of the machine.

The sudden change astounded Bill. He had been prepared for something, for some sort of change, but nothing like this. He half started out of his seat, then settled back.

Harl observed him and grinned.

"Scared," he jested.

"Hell, no," said Bill.

"You're traveling in time, my lad," said Harl. "You aren't in space any more. You are in a time stream. Space is curved about you. Can't travel in time when you're still in space, for space binds time to a measured pace, only so fast, no faster. Curve space about you, though, and you can travel in time. And when you're out of space there's absolutely no light, therefore, utter darkness. Likewise no gravity, nor any of the universal phenomena."

Bill nodded. They had worked it all out before, many, many times. Double wall construction of a strength to withstand the vacuum into which the flier would be plunged at the move of the lever which would snatch it out of space into the time stream. An insulation to guard against the absolute zero that would rule where there could be no heat. Gravity grids at their feet so that they would still be able to orient themselves when flung into that space where there was no gravity. An elaborate heating system to keep the motors warm, to prevent the freezing of gasoline, oil and water. Powerful atmosphere generators to supply air to the passengers and the motors.

It had represented years of work, ten years of it, and a wealth that mounted into seven figures. Time after time they had blundered, again and again they had failed. The discoveries they had made would have rocked the world, would have revolutionized industry, but they had breathed no word of it. They had thought of only one thing, time travel.

To travel into the future, to delve into the past, to conquer time,

to this the two young scientists had dedicated all their labors, and at last success lay beneath their hands.

It was in 1933 they had at last achieved their goal. The intervening months were spent in experiments and the building of the combination flier-time machine.

Miniature fliers were launched, with the miniature time machines set automatically. They had buzzed about the laboratory, to suddenly disappear. Perhaps at this very instant they were whirling madly through unguessed ages.

They managed to construct a small time machine, set to travel a month into the future. In a month's time, almost to the second, it had materialized on the laboratory floor where it had dropped at the end of its flight through time. That settled it! The feasibility of time travel was proved beyond all doubt.

Now Harl Swanson and Bill Kressman were out in the time stream. There had been a gasp of amazement from the crowd, on the street, which had seen the giant tri-motored plane suddenly disappear into thin air.

Harl crouched over the instrument board. His straining ears could distinguish the wheezy mutterings of the three motors as, despite the elaborate precautions taken to safeguard them, the inexorable fingers of absolute zero clutched at their throbbing metal.

This was a dangerous way, but the only safe way. Had they remained on the surface to plunge into the time stream they might have halted to find themselves and their machine buried by shifting earth; they might have found a great building over them, they might have found a canal covering them. Here in the air they were safe from all that might occur beneath them in the passing centuries through which they sped at an almost unbelievable pace. They were being fairly hurled through time.

Furthermore, the great machine would serve as a means of travel in that future day when they would roll out of the time stream back into space again. Perhaps it might serve as a means of escape, for there was no fore-knowledge to tell them what they might expect a few thousand years in the future.

The motors wheezed more and more. They were operating on a closed throttle. At full speed they might dash the propellers to bits.

However, they must be warmed up. Otherwise they would simply die. It would be stark tragedy to roll out into space with three dead engines. It would mean a crash which neither of them could hope to survive.

"Give her the gun, Bill," said Harl in a tense voice.

Bill pushed the accelerator slowly. The motors protested, sputtered, and then burst into a roar. Here, in the machine, because of

the artificial air, sound could be heard. Out in the time stream there could be no sound.

Harl listened anxiously, hoping fiercely that the propellers would stand.

Bill cut the acceleration and the motors, once more barely turning over, ran more smoothly.

Harl glanced at his wrist watch. Despite the fact they were in time, where actual time could not be measured by clocks, the little watch still ticked off the time-space seconds and minutes.

They had been out eight minutes. Seven minutes more and they must roll out of time into space.

Fifteen minutes was all that the tortured motors could stand of this intense cold and vacuum.

He glanced at the time dial. It read 2816. They had traveled 2816 years into the future. They should be well over 5000 when the fifteen minutes were at an end.

Bill touched his arm.

"You're sure we're still over Denver?"

Harl chuckled.

"If we aren't, we may find ourselves billions of miles out in space. It's a chance we have to take. According to all our experiments we should be in exactly the same position we were when we snapped into the time stream. We are occupying a hole in space. It should remain the same."

Their lungs began to ache. Either the atmosphere generators were failing or the air leakage out into the vacuum was greater than they had expected. Undeniably the air was becoming thinner. The motors still ran steadily, however. It must be a leakage from the cabin of the ship.

"How long?" bellowed Bill.

Harl glanced at his watch.

"Twelve minutes," he reported.

The time dial read 4224.

"Three minutes," replied Bill, "I guess we can stand it. The motors are running all right. It's getting colder, though, and the air's pretty thin."

"Leakage," said Harl gruffly.

The minutes dragged.

Bill tried to think. Here they hung, hypothetically, over the city of Denver. Less than a quarter of an hour ago, they were in the year 1935, now they were passing over years at a lightning-like speed—a speed of over 350 years in each space-minute. They must now be in about the year 6450.

He glanced at his hands. They were blue. It was intensely cold in

the cabin. Their heat was leaking—leaking swiftly. It was hard to breath. The air was rare—too rare for safety. Suppose they became unconscious. Then they would freeze—would drive endlessly through time. Frozen corpses, riding through the aeons. The earth beneath them would dissolve in space. New worlds might form, new galaxies be born as they whirled on in the time stream. The time needle would reach the pin, bend back upon itself and slip past the pin, to slam against the side of the dial, where it would still struggle to record the flight of the years.

He chafed his hands and glanced at the time dial. It read 5516.

"A quarter of a minute," snapped Harl, his teeth chattering, his right hand on the lever, his wrist watch held in front of him.

Bill placed his hands on the wheel.

"All right!" shouted Harl.

He jerked the lever.

They hung in the sky.

Harl uttered a cry of astonishment.

It was twilight. Beneath them were the ruins of a vast city. To the east lapped a sea, stretching to a murky horizon. The sea coast was a desert of heaped sand.

The motors, warming to their task, bellowed a mighty challenge.

"Where are we?" cried Harl.

Bill shook his head.

"It's not Denver," said Harl.

"Doesn't look much like it," agreed Bill, his teeth still chattering.

He circled, warming the motors.

There was no sign of humanity below them.

The motors blasted a throaty defiance to the desert sands and under Bill's hand, the machine came down in a long swoop, headed for a level stretch of sand near one of the largest of the white stone ruins.

It hit the ground, bounced high in a cloud of sand, struck and bounced again, then rolled to a stop.

Bill cut the motors.

"We're here," he said.

Harl stretched his legs wearily.

Bill glanced at the time dial. It read 5626.

"This is the year 7561," he said slowly, thoughtfully.

"Got your gun?" asked Harl.

Bill's hand went to his side, felt the reassuring touch of the .45 in its holster.

"I have it," he said.

"All right, let's get out."

Harl opened the door and they stepped out. The sand glittered

under their boots.

Harl turned the key in the door lock and locked the ring to his belt.

"Wouldn't do to lose the keys," he said.

A chill wind was blowing over the desert, moaning among the ruins, carrying with it a freight of fine, hard granules. Even in their heavy clothing, the time explorers shivered.

Harl grasped Bill by the arm, pointing to the east.

There hung a huge dull red ball.

Bill's jaw fell

"The sun," he said.

"Yes, the sun," said Harl.

They stared at one another in the half-light.

"Then this isn't the year 7561," stammered Bill.

"No, more likely the year 750,000, perhaps even more than that."

"The time dial was wrong then."

"It was wrong. Badly wrong. We were traveling through time a thousand times faster than we thought."

They were silent, studying the landscape about them. They saw only ruins which towered hundreds of feet above the sands. They were ruins of noble proportions, many of them still bearing the hint of a marvelous architecture of which the twentieth century would have been incapable. The stone was pure white, gleaming beautifully in the twilight the feeble rays of the great brick-red sun could not dispel.

"The time dial," said Bill, thoughtfully, "was registering thousands of years instead of years."

Harl nodded cheerlessly.

"Maybe," he said. "For all we know it may have been registering tens of thousands of years."

A creature, somewhat like a dog, dull gray in color, with tail hanging low, was silhouetted for a moment on a sand dune and then disappeared.

"These are the ruins of Denver," said Harl. "That sea we saw must cover the whole of eastern North American. Probably only the Rocky Mountains remain unsubmerged and they are a desert. Yes, we must have covered at least 750,000 years, perhaps seven million."

"What about the human race? Do you think there are any people left?" asked Bill.

"Possibly. Man is a hardy animal. It takes a lot to kill him and he could adapt himself to almost any kind of environment. This change, you must remember, came slowly."

Bill turned about and his cry rang in Harl's ear. Harl whirled.

Running toward them, leaping over the sands, came a motley horde of men. They were dressed in furs and they carried no weapons,

but they charged down upon the two as if to attack.

Harl yanked his .45 from its holster. His great hand closed around the weapon and his finger found the trigger. It gave him a sense of power, this burly six-shooter.

The men, their furs flying behind them, were only a hundred yards away. Now they yelled, blood-curdling, vicious whoops which left no doubt that they were enemies.

No weapons. Harl grinned. They'd give 'em hell and plenty of it. There were about fifty in the mob. Big odds, but not too great.

"We might as well let them have it," he said to Bill. The two guns roared. There was disorder in the running ranks, but the mob still forged ahead, leaving two of its members prone on the ground. Again the .45's barked, spurting a stream of fire.

Men staggered, screaming, to collapse. The rest hurdled them, raced on. It seemed nothing could stop them. They were less than fifty feet away.

The guns were empty. Swiftly the two plucked cartridges from their belts and reloaded.

Before they could fire the mob was on top of them. Bill thrust his gun into the face of a running foeman and fired. He had to sidestep quickly to prevent the fellow tumbling on top of him. A knotted fist connected with his head and he slipped to his knees. From that position he drilled two more of the milling enemies before they piled on top of him.

Through the turmoil he heard the roar of Harl's gun.

He felt the grip of many hands, felt bodies pressing close about him. He fought blindly and desperately.

He fought with hands, with feet, with suddenly bared teeth. He felt bodies wilt under his blows, felt blood upon his hands. The sand, kicked up by many feet, got into his nostrils and eyes, half strangling, half blinding him.

Only a few feet away Harl fought, fought in the same manner as his companion. With their weapons knocked from their hands they resorted to the tactics of their ancient forebears.

It seemed minutes that they battled with their attackers, but it could not have been more than seconds before the sheer weight of numbers subdued them, wound thongs tightly about their hands and feet and left them, trussed like two fowls ready for the grid.

"Hurt, Bill?" called Harl.

"No," replied Bill. "Just mussed up a bit."

"Me, too," said Harl.

They lay on their backs and stared up at the sky. Their captors moved away and massed about the plane.

A loud banging came to the ears of the two. Evidently the others

were trying to force an entrance into the machine.

"Let them bang," said Harl. "They can't break anything."

"Except a propeller," replied Bill.

After more banging, the men returned and untying the bonds on the feet of the captives, hoisted them up.

For the first time they had an opportunity to study their captors. They were tall men, well proportioned, clean of limb, with the stamp of well-being about them. Aside from their figures, however, they held a distinctly barbarous appearance. Their hair was roughly trimmed, as were their beards. They walked with a slouch and their feet shuffled in the sand with the gait of one who holds a purposeless existence. They were dressed in well-tanned furs, none too clean. They bore no arms and their eyes were the eyes of furtive beings, shifty, restless, as are the eyes of hunted beasts, always on the lookout for danger.

"March," said one of them, a large fellow with a protruding front tooth. The single word was English, with the pronunciation slightly different than it would have been in the twentieth century, but good, pure English.

They marched, flanked on either side by their captors. The march led back over the same route as the future-men had come. They passed the dead, but no attention was paid them, their comrades passing the sprawled figures with merely a glance. Life apparently was cheap in this place.

CHAPTER II
Orders of Golan-Kirt

They passed between monstrous ruins. The men talked among themselves, but, although the tongue was English, it was so intermixed with unfamiliar words and spoken with such an accent that the two could understand very little of it.

They reached what appeared to be a street. It led between rows of ruins and now other humans appeared, among them women and children. All stared at the captives and jabbered excitedly.

"Where are you taking us?" Bill asked a man who walked by his side.

The man ran his fingers through his beard and spat in the sand.

"To the arena," he said slowly that the twentieth century man might understand the words.

"What for?" Bill also spoke slowly and concisely.

"The games," said the man, shortly, as if displeased at being questioned.

"What are the games?" asked Harl.

"You'll find out soon enough. They are held at high sun today," growled the other. The reply brought a burst of brutal laughter from the rest.

"They will find out when they face the minions of Golan-Kirt," chortled a voice.

"The minions of Golan-Kirt!" exclaimed Harl.

"Hold your tongue," snarled the man with the protruding tooth, "or we will tear it from your mouth."

The two time-travelers asked no more questions.

They plodded on. Although the sand beneath their feet was packed, it was heavy going and their legs ached. Fortunately the future-men did not hustle their pace, seeming to be content to take their time.

A good sized crowd of children had gathered and accompanied the procession, staring at the twentieth century men, shrieking shrill gibberish at them. A few of them, crowding too close or yelling too loudly, gained the displeasure of the guards and were slapped to one side.

For fifteen minutes they toiled up a sandy slope. Now they gained the top and in a depression below them they saw the arena. It was a great building, open to the air, which had apparently escaped the general destruction visited upon the rest of the city. Here and there repairs had been made, evident by the decidedly inferior type of

workmanship.

The building was circular in shape, and about a half-mile in diameter. It was built of a pure white stone, like the rest of the ruined city.

The two twentieth century men gasped at its size.

They had little time, however, to gaze upon the building, for their captors urged them on. They walked slowly down the slope and, directed by the future-men, made their way through one of the great arching gateways and into the arena proper.

On all sides rose tier upon tier of seats, designed to hold thousands of spectators. On the opposite side of the arena was a series of steel cages, set under the seats.

The future-men urged them forward.

"They're going to lock us up, evidently," said Bill.

He of the protruding tooth laughed, as if enjoying a huge joke.

"It will not be for long," he said.

As they approached the cages, they saw that a number of them were occupied. Men clung to the bars, peering out at the group crossing the sandy arena. Others sat listlessly, regarding their approach with little or no interest. Many of them, the twentieth century men noticed, bore the marks of prolonged incarceration.

They halted before one of the cells. One of the future-men stepped to the door of the cage and unlocked it with a large key. As the door grated back on rusty hinges, the others seized the two, unbound their hands and roughly hurled them inside the prison. The door clanged to with a hollow, ringing sound and the key grated in the lock.

They struggled up out of the dirt and refuse which covered the floor of the cell and squatted on their heels to watch the future-men make their way across the arena and through the archway by which they had come.

"I guess we're in for it," said Bill.

Harl produced a pack of cigarettes.

"Light up," he said gruffly.

They lit up. Smoke from tobacco grown in 1935 floated out of their cell over the ruins of the city of Denver, upon which shone a dying sun.

They smoked their cigarettes, crushed them in the sand. Harl rose and began a minute examination of their prison. Bill joined him. They went over it inch by inch, but it was impregnable. Except for the iron gate, it was constructed of heavy masonry. An examination of the iron gate gave no hope. Again they squatted on their heels.

Harl glanced at his wrist watch.

"Six hours since we landed," he said, "and from the appearance of

the shadows, it's still morning. The sun was well up in the sky, too, when we arrived."

"The days are longer than those back in 1935," explained Bill, "The earth turns slower. The days here may be twenty-four hours or longer."

"Listen," hissed Harl.

To their ears came the sound of voices. They listened intently. Mingled with the voices was the harsh grating of steel. The voices seemed to come from their right. They grew in volume.

"If we only had our guns," moaned Harl.

The clamor of voices was close and seemed to be almost beside them.

"It's the other prisoners," gasped Bill. "They must be feeding them or something."

His surmise was correct.

Before their cell appeared an old man. He was stooped and a long white beard hung over his skinny chest. His long hair curled majestically over his shoulders. In one hand he carried a jug of about a gallon capacity and a huge loaf of bread.

But it was neither the bread nor the jug which caught the attention of Harl and Bill. In his loin cloth, beside a massive ring of keys, were thrust their two .45's.

He set down the jug and the loaf and fumbled with the keys. Selecting one he unlocked and slid back a panel near the bottom of the great door. Carefully he set the jug and the loaf inside the cell.

The two men inside exchanged a glance. The same thought had occurred to each. When the old man came near the door, it would be a simple matter to grasp him. With the guns there was a chance of blazing a way to the ship.

The oldster, however, was pulling the weapons from his loin cloth.

Their breath held in wonder, the time-travelers saw him lay them beside the jug and the loaf.

"The command of Golan-Kirt," he muttered in explanation. "He has arrived to witness the games. He commanded that the weapons be returned. They will make the games more interesting."

"More interesting," chuckled Harl, rocking slowly on the balls of his feet.

These future men, who seemed to possess absolutely no weapons, apparently did not appreciate the deadliness of the .45's.

"Golan-Kirt?" questioned Bill, speaking softly.

The old man seemed to see them for the first time.

"Yes," he said. "Know you not of Golan-Kirt? He-Who-Came-Out-of-the-Cosmos?"

"No," said Bill.

"Then truly can I believe what has come to my ears of you?" said the old man.

"What have you heard?"

"That you came out of time," replied the oldster, "in a great machine."

"That is true," said Harl. "We came out of the twentieth century."

The old man slowly shook his head.

"I know naught of the twentieth century."

"How could you?" asked Harl. "It must have ended close to a million years ago."

The other shook his head again.

"Years?" he asked. "What are years?"

Harl drew in his breath sharply.

"A year," he explained, "is a measurement of time."

"Time cannot be measured," replied the old man dogmatically.

"Back in the twentieth century we measured it," said Harl.

"Any man who thinks he can measure time is a fool," the future-man was uncompromising.

Harl held out his hand, palm down, and pointed to his wrist watch.

"That measures time," he asserted.

The old man scarcely glanced at it.

"That," he said, "is a foolish mechanism and has nothing to do with time."

Bill laid a warning hand on his friend's arm.

"A year," he explained slowly, "is our term for one revolution of the earth about the sun."

"So that is what it means," said the old man. "Why didn't you say so at first? The movement of the earth, however, has no association with time. Time is purely relative."

"We came from a time when the world was much different," said Bill. "Can you give us any idea of the number of revolutions the earth has made since then?"

"How can I?" asked the old man, "when we speak in terms that neither understands? I can only tell you that since Golan-Kirt came out of the Cosmos the earth has circled the sun over five million times."

Five million times! Five million years! Five million years since some event had happened, an event which may not have occurred for many other millions of years after the twentieth century. At least five million years in the future; there was no telling how much more!

Their instrument had been wrong. How wrong they could not remotely have guessed until this moment!

The twentieth century. It had a remote sound, an unreal

significance. In this age, with the sun a brick red ball and the city of Denver a mass of ruins, the twentieth century was a forgotten second in the great march of time, it was as remote as the age when man emerged from the beast.

"Has the sun always been as it is?" asked Harl.

The old man shook his head.

"Our wise ones tell us that one time the sun was so hot it hurt one's eyes. They also tell us it is cooling, that in the future it will give no light or heat at all."

The oldster shrugged his shoulders.

"Of course, before that happens, all men will be dead."

The old man pulled the little panel shut and locked it. He turned to go.

"Wait," cried Harl.

The old one faced them.

"What do you want?" he asked, mumbling half-angrily in his beard.

"Sit down, friend," said Harl. "We would like to talk further."

The other hesitated, half wheeling to go, then turned back.

"We came from a time when the sun hurt one's eyes. We have seen Denver as a great and proud city. We have seen this land when the grass grew upon it and rain fell and there were broad plains where the sea now lies," said Harl.

The oldster sank to the sand in front of their cage. His eyes were lighted with a wild enthusiasm and his two skinny hands clutched the iron bars.

"You have looked upon the world when it was young," he cried. "You have seen green grass and felt rain. It seldom rains here."

"We have seen all you mention," Harl assured him. "But we would ask why we have been treated as foes. We came as friends, hoping to meet friends, but ready for war."

"Aye, ready for war," said the old man in trembling tones, his eyes on the guns. "Those are noble weapons. They tell me you strewed the sands with the dead ere you were taken."

"But why were we not treated as friends?" insisted Harl.

"There are no friends here," cackled the old man. "Not since Golan-Kirt came. All are at one another's throats."

"Who is this Golan-Kirt?"

"Golan-Kirt came out of the Cosmos to rule over the world," said the old man, as if intoning a chant. "He is neither Man nor Beast. There is no good in him. He hates and hates. He is pure Evil. For after all, there is no friendliness or goodness in the universe. We have no proof that the Cosmos is benevolent. Long ago our ancestors believed in love. This was a fallacy. Evil is greater than good."

“Tell me,” asked Bill, moving closer to the bars, “have you ever seen Golan-Kirt?”

“Aye, I have.”

“Tell us of him,” urged Bill.

“I cannot,” there was stark terror in the old man’s eyes. “I cannot!”

He huddled closer to the cage and his voice dropped to an uncanny whisper.

“Men out of time, I will tell you something. He is hated, because he teaches hate. We obey him because we must. He holds our minds in the hollow of his hand. He rules by suggestion only. He is not immortal. He fears death—he is afraid—there is a way, if only one with the courage might be found—”

The old man’s face blanched and a look of horror crept into his eyes. His muscles tensed and his clawlike hands clutched madly at the bars. He slumped against the gate and gasped for breath.

Faintly his whisper came, low and halting.

“Golan-Kirt—your weapons—believe nothing—close your mind to all suggestion—”

He stopped, gasping for breath.

“I have fought—” he continued, haltingly, with an effort. “I have won—. I have told you—. He has—killed me—he will not kill you—now that you—know—.”

The old man was on the verge of death. Wide-eyed, the two saw him ward it off, gain a precious second.

“Your weapons—will kill him—he’s easy to kill—by one who does not—believe in him—he is a—.”

The whisper pinched out and the old man slid slowly to the sands in front of the cage.

The two stared at the crumpled form of humanity.

“Killed by suggestion,” gasped Harl.

Bill nodded.

“He was a brave man,” he said.

Harl regarded the corpse intently. His eyes lighted on the key ring and kneeling, he reached out and drew the body of the future-man close. His fingers closed on the ring and ripped it from the loin cloth.

“We’re going home,” he said.

“And on the way out we’ll bump off the big shot,” added Bill.

He lifted the guns from the floor and clicked fresh cartridges into the chambers. Harl rattled the keys. He tried several before he found the correct one. The lock screeched and the gate swung open protestingly.

With quick steps they passed out of the cell. For a moment they halted in silent tribute before the body of the old man. With helmets

doffed the twentieth century men stood beside the shriveled form of a man who was a hero, a man who had flung his hatred in the face of some terrible entity that taught hate to the people of the world. Scanty as was the information which he had given, it set the two on their guard, gave them an inkling of what to expect.

As they turned about they involuntarily started. Filing into the amphitheater, rapidly filling the seats, were crowds of future-men. A subdued roar, the voice of the assembling people, came to their ears.

The populace was assembling for the games.

"This may complicate matters," said Bill.

"I don't think so," replied Harl. "It's Golan-Kirt we must deal with. We would have had to in any case. These men do not count. As I understand it he exercises an absolute control over them. The removal of that control may change the habits and psychology of the future-men."

"The only thing we can do is fight Golan-Kirt and then act accordingly," said Bill.

"The man who captured us spoke of his minions," Harl said thoughtfully.

"He may be able to produce hallucinations," Bill hazarded. "He may be able to make one believe something exists when it really doesn't. In that case, the people would naturally believe them to be creatures which came at his beck and call."

"But the old man knew," objected Harl. "He knew that it was all mere suggestion. If all the people knew this the rule of Golan-Kirt would end abruptly. They would no longer believe in his omnipotence. Without this belief, suggestion, by which he rules, would be impossible."

"The old man," asserted Bill, "gained his knowledge in some mysterious manner and paid for its divulgence with his life. Still the old fellow didn't know all of it. He believed this entity came out of the Cosmos."

Harl shook his head, thoughtfully.

"It may have come out of the Cosmos. Remember, we are at least five million years in the future. I expect to find some great intelligence. It is physical, for the old man claimed to have seen it, and that should make our job easier."

"The old man said he was not immortal," commented Bill. "Therefore, he is vulnerable and our guns may do the work. Another thing—we are not to believe a single thing we feel, hear, or see. He seems to rule wholly by suggestion. He will try to kill us by suggestion, just as he killed the old fellow."

Harl nodded.

"It's a matter of will power," he said. "A matter of brain and bluff.

Apparently the will power of these people has degenerated and Golan-Kirt finds it easy to control their minds. They are born, live, and die under his influence. It has almost become hereditary to accept his power. We have the advantage of coming out of an age when men were obliged to use their brains. Perhaps the human mind degenerated because, as science increased the ease of life, there was little need to use it. Some fine minds may still remain, but apparently they are few. We are doubters, schemers, bluffers. Golan-Kirt will find us tougher than these future-men."

CHAPTER III
The Struggle of the Ages

Bill produced cigarettes and the two lighted up. Slowly they walked across the vast arena, guns hanging in their right hands. People were filing into the place and the tiers were filling.

A roar came out of the tiers of seats before them. They recognized it. It was the cry of the gathering crowd, the cry for blood, the expression of a desire to see battle.

Harl grinned.

"Regular football crowd," he commented.

More and more poured into the arena, but it was apparent that the inhabitants of the ruined city could fill only a very small section of the thousands upon thousands of seats.

The two seemed lost in the mighty space. Above them, almost at the zenith, hung the vast red sun. They seemed to move in a twilight-filled desert rimmed in by enormous white cliffs.

"Denver must have been a large city at the time this place was built," commented Bill. "Think of the number of people it would hold. Wonder what it was used for?"

"Probably we'll never know," said Harl.

They had gained the approximate center of the arena.

Harl halted.

"Do you know," he said, "I've been thinking. It seems to me we must have a fairly good chance against Golan-Kirt. For the last fifteen minutes every thought of ours has been in open defiance of him, but he has not attempted our annihilation. Although it is possible he may only be biding his time. I am beginning to believe he can't read our minds as he could the mind of the old man. He killed him the moment he uttered a word of treason."

Bill nodded.

As if in answer to what Harl had said, a great weight seemed to press in upon them. Bill felt a deadly illness creeping over him. His knees sagged and his brain whirled. Spots danced before his eyes and a horrible pain gripped his stomach.

He took a step forward and stumbled. A hand clutched his shoulder and fiercely shook him. The shake momentarily cleared his brain. Through the clearing mist which seemed to hang before his eyes, he saw the face of his friend, a face white and lined.

The lips in the face moved.

"Buck up, old man. There's nothing wrong with you. You're feeling fine."

Something seemed to snap inside his head. This was suggestion—the suggestion of Golan-Kirt. He had to fight it. That was it—fight it.

He planted his feet firmly in the sand, straightened his shoulders with an effort, and smiled.

"Hell, no," he said, "there's nothing wrong with me. I'm feeling fine."

Harl slapped him on the back.

"That's the spirit," he roared. "It almost floored me for a minute. We've got to fight it, boy. We've got to fight it."

Bill laughed, harshly. His head was clear now and he could feel the strength flowing back into his body. They had won the first round!

"But where is this Golan-Kirt?" he burst out.

"Invisible," snarled Harl, "but I have a theory that he can't put in his best licks in such a state. We'll force him to show himself and then we'll give him the works."

The frenzied roar of the crowd came to their ears. Those on the bleachers had seen and appreciated the little drama out in the middle of the arena. They were crying for more.

Suddenly a spiteful rattle broke out behind the two.

They started. That sound was familiar. It was the rat-a-tat of a machine gun. With no ceremony they fell flat, pressing their bodies close against the ground, seeking to burrow into the sand.

Little puffs of sand spurted up all about them. Bill felt a searing pain in his arm. One of the bullets had found him. This was the end. There was no obstruction to shield them in the vast level expanse from the gun that chuckled and chattered at their rear. Another searing pain caught him in the leg. Another hit.

Then he laughed—a wild laugh. There was no machine gun, no bullets. It was all suggestion. A trick to make them believe they were being killed—a trick, which, if carried far enough, would kill them.

He struggled to his knees, hauling Harl up beside him. His leg and arm still pained, but he paid them no attention. There was nothing wrong with them, he told himself fiercely, absolutely nothing wrong.

"It's suggestion again," he shouted at Harl, "There isn't any machine gun."

Harl nodded. They regained their feet and turned. There, only a couple of hundred yards away, a khaki-clad figure crouched behind a gun that chattered wickedly, a red flame licking the muzzle.

"That isn't a machine gun," said Bill, speaking slowly.

"Of course, it's not a machine gun," Harl spoke as if by rote.

They walked slowly toward the flaming gun. Although bullets apparently whistled all about them, none struck them. The pain in Bill's arm and leg no longer existed.

Suddenly the gun disappeared, and with it the khaki-clad figure.

One moment they were there, the next they were not.

"I thought it would do just that," said Bill.

"The old boy is still going strong, though," replied Harl. "Here is some more of his suggestion."

Harl pointed to one of the arching gateways. Through it marched file upon file of soldiers, clad in khaki, metal helmets on their heads, guns across their shoulders. An officer uttered a sharp command and the troops began to deploy over the field.

A shrill blast of a bugle drew the attention of the two time-travelers from the soldiers and through another gateway they beheld the advance of what appeared to be a cohort of Roman legionnaires. Shields flashed dully in the sun and the rattle of arms could be distinctly heard.

"Do you know what I believe?" asked Harl.

"What is it?"

"Golan-Kirt cannot suggest anything new to us. The machine guns and the soldiers and legionnaires are all things of which we have former knowledge."

"How is it," asked Bill, "that we see these things when we know they do not exist?"

"I do not know," replied Harl, "there are a lot of funny things about this business that I can't understand."

"Anyhow, he is giving the crowd a good show," observed Bill.

The bleachers were in an uproar. To the ears of the two came the shrill screaming of women, the loud roars of the men. The populace was thoroughly enjoying itself.

A lion, large and ferocious, growling fiercely, leaped past the two men. A thunder of hoof-beats announced the arrival of more of the brain creatures.

"It's about time for us to do something," said Harl.

He lifted his .45 high in the air and fired. A hush fell.

"Golan-Kirt, attention!" roared Harl, in a voice that could be heard in every part of the arena. "We challenge you to personal combat. We have no fear of your creatures. They cannot harm us. You are the one we wish to fight."

An awed silence fell over the crowd. It was the first time their god had ever been openly challenged. They waited for the two lone figures out in the arena to be stricken in a heap.

They were not stricken, however.

Again Harl's voice rang out.

"Come out of hiding, you fat-bellied toad!" he thundered. "Come and fight if you have the guts, you dirty, yellow coward!"

The crowd may not have gathered the exact meaning of the words, but the full insult of them was plain. A threatening murmur

rolled out from the bleachers, and there was a sudden surging of the crowd. Men leaped over the low wall in front of the seats and raced across the arena.

Then a sonorous voice, deep and strong, rolled out.

"Stop," it said. "I, Golan-Kirt, will deal with these men."

Harl noticed that the soldiers and the lion had disappeared. The arena was empty except for him and his comrade and the score of future-men who had halted in their tracks at the voice which had come out of nothingness.

They waited, tensed. Harl wriggled his feet into a firmer position. He slipped a cartridge in the gun to take the place of the one which had been fired. Bill mopped his brow with the sleeve of his coat.

"It's going to be brains now," Harl told his friend.

Bill grinned.

"Two mediocre intelligences against a great one," he joked.

"Look, Bill!" shouted Harl.

Directly in front and slightly above the level of their heads a field of light had formed, a small ball of brightness in the murky atmosphere. Slowly it grew. Vibrations set in.

The two watched, fascinated. The vibrations quickened until the whole field was quivering. As the vibrations increased the light faded and a monstrosity began to take form. Only vaguely could it be seen at first. Then it became clearer and clearer, began to take definite form.

Hanging in the air, suspended without visible means of support, was a gigantic brain, approximately two feet in diameter. A naked brain, with the convolutions exposed. It was a ghastly thing.

The horror of it was heightened by the two tiny, pig-like, lidless, close-set eyes and a curving beak which hung directly below the frontal portion of the brain, resting in what was apparently an atrophied face.

The two were aghast, but with a tremendous effort they kept close hold on their self-control.

"Greetings, Golan-Kirt," drawled Harl, sarcasm putting an edge to the words.

As he spoke, his arm swung up and under the pressure of his finger, the hammer of the gun slowly moved backward. But before the muzzle could be brought in line with the great brain, the arm stopped and Harl stood like a frozen man, held rigid by the frightful power which poured forth from Golan-Kirt.

Bill's arm flashed up and his .45 broke the silence with a sullen roar. However, even as he fired, his arm was flung aside as if by a mighty blow and the speeding bullet missed the huge brain by the mere fraction of an inch.

"Presumptuous fools," roared a voice, which, however, seemed

not a voice, for there was no sound, merely the sense of hearing. The two, standing rigidly, as if at attention, realized that it was telepathy: that the brain before them was sending out powerful emanations.

"Presumptuous fools, you would fight me, Golan-Kirt? I, who have a hundred-fold the mental power of your combined brains? I, who hold the knowledge of all time?"

"We would fight you," snarled Harl. "We are going to fight you. We know you for what you are. You are not out of the Cosmos. You are a laboratory specimen. Unknown ages ago you were developed under artificial conditions. You are not immortal. You fear our weapons. A bullet in that dirty brain of yours will finish you."

"Who are you to judge," came the thought-wave, "you, with your tiny, twentieth century brain? You have come unbidden into my time, you have defied me. I shall destroy you. I, who came out of the Cosmos aeons ago to rule over the portion of the Universe I chose as my own, do not fear you or your ridiculous weapons."

"Yet you foiled us when we would have used our weapons on you. If I could reach you I would not need my weapon. I could tear you apart, destroy you with the strength of my two hands."

"Say on," rumbled the thought-waves. "Say what you believe me to be, and when you are done I shall obliterate you. You shall be dust floating in the air, ashes on the sands."

There was an unveiled tone of mockery in the brain emanations.

Harl raised his voice, almost shouting. It was a deliberate act, done in hopes the future-men would hear, that they might realize not too late the true nature of the tyrant Golan-Kirt. They did hear and their mouths gaped as they listened.

"You once were a man," Harl roared, "a great scientist. You studied the brain, specialized in it. At last you discovered a great secret, which gave you the power of developing the brain to an unheard-of degree. Sure of your technique, and realizing the power you might enjoy, you transformed yourself into a brain creature. You are a fraud and an impostor. You have mis-ruled these people for millions of years. You are not out of the Cosmos—you are a man, or what once was a man. You are an atrocity, an abomination—"

The thought emanations which flowed from out the brain trembled, as if with rage.

"You lie. I am out of the Cosmos. I am immortal. I shall kill you—kill you."

Suddenly Bill laughed, a resounding guffaw. It was an escape from the terrible tension, but as he laughed a ludicrous angle presented itself—the twentieth century travelers millions of years ahead of their time wrangling with a cheat pawning himself off as a god on a people who would not be born until long after he was dead.

He felt the horrible power of Golan-Kirt centering upon him. Perspiration streamed down his face and his body trembled. He felt his strength leaving him.

He stopped laughing. As he did so, he seemed to be struck, as if by a blow. He staggered. Then sudden realization flashed through him. Laughter! Laughter, that was it. Laughter and ridicule! That would turn the trick.

"Laugh, you fool, laugh," he screamed at Harl.

Uncomprehendingly, Harl obeyed.

The two rocked with laughter. They whooped and roared.

Hardly knowing what he did, almost involuntarily, Bill screeched horrible things at the great brain, reviled it, taunted it, called it almost unspeakable names.

Harl began to understand. It was all a great game that Bill was playing. A supreme egoism such as was lodged in the brain pitted against them could not bear ridicule, would lose its grip before a storm of jeers. For uncounted centuries, through some miraculous power, it had lived and in all that time it had been accorded only the highest honor. Derision was something with which it was unacquainted, a terrible weapon suddenly loosed upon it.

Harl joined with Bill and hurled gibes at Golan-Kirt. It was a high carnival of mockery. They were not conscious of their words. Their brains responded to the emergency and their tongues formed sentences of unguessed taunts.

Between sentences they laughed, howling with satanic glee.

Through all their laughter they felt the power of the brain. They felt its anger mount at their taunting. Their bodies were racked with pain, they wanted to fall on the sands and writhe in agony, but they continued to laugh, to shout taunts.

It seemed an eternity that they fought with Golan-Kirt, all the time shrieking with laughter, while they suffered fine-edged torture from the tops of their heads to the soles of their feet. Still they dare not stop their laughter, dare not cease their hideous derision, poking fun at the huge intelligence which opposed them. That was their one weapon. Without it the engulfing waves of suggestion which poured with relentless fury upon them would have snapped asunder every nerve in their bodies.

They sensed the raging of the great brain. It was literally crazed with anger. They were "getting its goat!" They were ridiculing the very life out of it.

Unconsciously they allowed the pitch of their laughter to lower. From sheer exhaustion they lapsed into silence.

Suddenly they felt the terrible force of the brain renewed, as it drew upon some mysterious reserve strength. It struck them like a

blow, doubling them over, clouding their eyes, dulling their minds, racking every nerve and joint.

Hot irons seemed to sear them, hundreds of needles seemed thrust in their flesh, sharp knives seemed to slash their bodies. They reeled blindly, gropingly, mouthing curses, crying out in pain.

Through the red haze of torture came a whisper, a soft, enchanting whisper beckoning to them, showing them a way of escape.

"Turn your weapons on yourselves. End all of this torture. Death is painless."

The whisper fluttered through their brains. That was the way out! Why endure this seemingly endless torture? Death was painless. The muzzle against one's head, a pressure on the trigger, oblivion.

Bill placed his gun against his temple. His finger contracted against the trigger. He laughed. This was a joke. A rare joke. Robbing Golan-Kirt by his own hand.

Another voice burst through his laughter. It was Harl.

"You fool! It's Golan-Kirt! It's Golan-Kirt, you fool!"

He saw his friend staggering toward him, saw his face pinched with pain, saw the moving of the livid lips as they shouted the warning.

Bill's hand dropped to his side. Even as he continued that insane laughter, he felt chagrin steal over him. The hideous brain had played its trump card and had failed, but it had almost finished him. Had it not been for Harl he would have been stretched on the sand, a suicide, his head blown to bits.

Then suddenly they felt the power of the brain slipping, felt its strength falter and ebb. They had beaten it!

They sensed the gigantic struggle going on in that great brain, the struggle to regain the grip it had lost.

For years on end it had lived without struggle, without question that it was the ruler of the earth. They sensed the futile anger and the devastating fear which revolved in the convolutions of Golan-Kirt.

But he was beaten, beaten at last by men from out of a forgotten age. He had met defeat at the hands of ridicule, something he had never known, a thing he had not suspected.

His strength ebbed steadily. The twentieth century men felt his dread power lift from them, sensed the despair which surged through him.

They stopped their laughter, their sides sore, their throats hoarse. Then they heard. The arena resounded with laughter. The crowd was laughing. The horrible uproar beat like a tumult upon them. The future-men were roaring, bent over, stamping their feet, throwing back their heads, screaming to the murky skies. They were laughing at

Golan-Kirt, screaming insults at him, hooting him. It was the end of his rule.

For generations the future-men had hated him with the very hate he had taught them. They had hated and feared. Now they feared no longer and hate rode unchained.

From a god he had fallen to the estate of a ridiculous fraud. He was a thing of pity, an uncloaked clown, simply a naked, defenseless brain that had bluffed its way through centuries of kingship.

Through bleared eyes the twentieth century men saw the great brain, writhing now under the scorn of its erstwhile subjects, being laughed powerless. No long did it hold control over these creatures of a dying world. Its close-set eyes glowed fiercely, its beak clicked angrily. It was tired, too tired to regain its rule. It was the end of Golan-Kirt!

The revolvers of the time-travelers came up almost simultaneously. This time the sights lined on the brain. There was no power to ward off the danger.

The guns roared rapidly, spitting hateful fire. At the impact of the bullets the brain turned over in the air, blood spurted from it, great gashes appeared in it. With a thump it struck the ground, quivered and lay still.

The time-travelers, their eyes closing from sheer weariness, their knees suddenly weak, slumped to the sand, the .45's still smoking.

Over the arena floated the full-toned roar of the future-men.

"Hail to the Deliverers! Golan-Kirt is dead! His rule is ended! Hail to the saviors of the race!"

EPILOGUE

"It is impossible to reverse time. You cannot travel back to your own age. I have no idea of what will occur if you attempt it, but I do know it is impossible. We of this age knew travel into the future was possible, but we lacked the technique to build a machine to try it. Under the rule of Golan-Kirt there was no material progress, only a steady degeneration. We know that it is impossible to reverse time. We, as a people, beg you not to attempt it."

Old Agnar Nohl, his white beard streaming in the wind, his hair flying, spoke seriously. There was a troubled frown on his face.

"We love you," he went on, "you freed us of the tyranny of the brain which ruled over us for uncounted time. We need you. Stay with us, help us rebuild this land, help us construct machines, give us some of the marvelous knowledge which we, as a race, have lost. We can give you much in return, for we have not forgotten all of the science we knew before the coming of Golan-Kirt."

Harl shook his head.

"We must at least try to go back," he said.

The two twentieth century men stood beside the plane. Before them was a solid mass of humanity, a silent humanity in the shadow of the silent ruins of the city of Denver, the future-men who had come to bid the time-travelers a regretful farewell.

A chill wind howled over the desert, carrying its freight of sand. The furs of the future-men fluttered in the gale as it played a solemn dirge between the ruined walls of humbled buildings.

"If there was a chance of your success, we would speed you on your way," said old Agnar, "but we are reluctant to let you go to what may be your death. We are selfish enough to wish to hold you for ourselves, but we love you enough to let you go. You taught us hate was wrong, you removed the hate that ruled us. We wish only the best for you.

"It is impossible to go back in time. Why not remain? We need you badly. Our land grows less and less food every year. We must discover how to make synthetic food or we shall starve. This is only one of our problems. There are many others. You cannot go back. Stay and help us!"

Again Harl shook his head.

"No, we must try it. We may fail, but we must try it at least. If we succeed we shall return and bring with us books of knowledge and tools to work with."

Agnar combed his beard with skinny fingers.

"You'll fail," he said.

“But if we don’t we will return,” said Bill.

“Yes, if you don’t,” replied the old man.

“We are going now,” said Bill. “We thank you for your thoughtfulness. We must at least try. We are sorry to leave you. Please believe that.”

“I do believe it,” cried the old man and he seized their hands in a farewell clasp.

Harl opened the door of the plane and Bill clambered in.

At the door Harl stood with upraised hand.

“Good-bye,” he said. “Someday we will return.”

The crowd burst into a roar of farewell. Harl climbed into the plane and closed the door.

The motors bellowed, droning out the shouting of the future-men and the great machine charged down the sand. With a rush it took the air. Three times Bill circled the ruined city in a last mute good-bye to the men who watched silently and sorrowfully below.

Then Harl threw the lever. Again the utter darkness, the feeling of hanging in nothingness.

The motors, barely turning, muttered at the change. A minute passed, two minutes.

“Who says we can’t travel back in time!” Harl shouted triumphantly. He pointed to the needle. It was slowly creeping back across the face of the dial.

“Maybe the old man was wrong after—”

Bill never finished the sentence.

“Roll her out,” he screamed at Harl, “roll her out. One of our engines is going dead!”

Harl snatched at the lever, jerked frantically at it. The faulty motor choked and coughed, sputtered, then broke into a steady drone.

The two men in the cabin regarded one another with blanched faces. They knew they had escaped a possible crash—and death—by bare seconds.

Again they hung in the air. Again they saw the brick-red sun, the desert, and the sea. Below them loomed the ruins of Denver.

“We couldn’t have gone far back in time,” said Harl. “It looks the same as ever.”

They circled the ruins.

“We had better land out in the desert to fix up the engine,” suggested Harl. “Remember we have traveled back in time and Golan-Kirt still rules over the land. We don’t want to have to kill him a second time. We might not be able to do it.”

The plane was flying low and he nosed it up. Again the faulty engine sputtered and missed.

“She’s going dead this time for certain,” yelled Bill. “We’ll have to

chance it, Harl. We have to land and chance getting away again."

Harl nodded grimly.

Before them lay the broad expanse of the arena. It was either that or crash.

As Bill nosed the plane down the missing motor sputtered for the last time, went dead.

They flashed over the white walls of the amphitheater and down into the arena. The plane struck the sand, raced across it, slowed to a stop.

Harl opened the door.

"Our only chance is to fix it up in a hurry and get out of here," he shouted at Bill. "We don't want to meet that damn brain again."

He stopped short.

"Bill," he spoke scarcely above a whisper, "am I seeing things?"

Before him, set on the sands of the arena, only a few yards from the plane, was a statute of heroic size, a statue of himself and Bill.

Even from where he stood he could read the inscription, carved in the white stone base of the statue in characters which closely resembled written English.

Slowly, haltingly, he read it aloud, stumbling over an occasional queer character.

"Two men, Harl Swanson and Bill Kressman, came out of time to kill Golan-Kirt and to free the race."

Below it he saw other characters.

"They may return."

"Bill," he sobbed, "we haven't traveled back in time. We have traveled further into the future. Look at that stone—eroded, ready to crumble to pieces. That statue has stood there for thousands of years!"

Bill slumped back into his seat, his face ashen, his eyes staring.

"The old man was right," he screamed. "He was right. We'll never see the twentieth century again."

He leaned over toward the time machine.

His face twitched.

"Those instruments," he shrieked, "those damned instruments! They were wrong. They lied, they lied!"

With his bare fists he beat at them, smashing them, unaware that the glass cut deep gashes and his hands were smeared with blood.

Silence weighed down over the plain. There was absolutely no sound.

Bill broke the silence.

"The future-men," he cried, "where are the future-men?"

He answered his own question.

"They are all dead," he screamed, "all dead. They are starved—starved because they couldn't manufacture synthetic food. We are

alone! Alone at the end of the world!”

Harl stood in the door of the plane.

Over the rim of the amphitheater the huge red sun hung in a sky devoid of clouds. A slight wind stirred the sand at the base of the crumbling statue.

Skirmish

Although Clifford D. Simak sent this story to his agent under the title "Skirmish," it would first appear in the December 1950 issue of Amazing Stories *under the melodramatic title "Bathe Your Bearings in Blood." And while this editor confesses that he rather likes the latter title, it appears here under its original title, since it is clear that Cliff deliberately restored the initial title for all further appearances of the story. Cliff was paid $114.75 for that first publication (a strange number that may result from the commission taken by his agent, Fred Pohl).*

The story is old enough that it contains a couple of anachronisms that should perhaps be explained: To "tie the can" on someone was a euphemism for firing that person from his or her job and the Daily Worker *was a publication of the government of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics that was generally thought of, in Western literary and journalistic circles, as an unusually ham-fisted propaganda rag of no redeeming social value.*

It is probably useless to engage in speculations about whether this story was an ancestor of Fred Saberhagen's "Berserker" stories, or even of the (much later) "Transformer" movies. But I would suggest that Cliff Simak, having already written a number of stories featuring benign robots, including some of the stories in the City *cycle, might have been examining the obverse of the robot coin with a certain relish …*

—dww

It was a good watch. It had been a good watch for more than thirty years. His father had owned it first and his mother had saved it for him after his father died and had given it to him on his eighteenth birthday. For all the years since then it had served him faithfully.

But now, comparing it with the clock on the newsroom wall, looking from his wrist to the big face of the clock over the coat cabinets, Joe Crane was forced to admit that his watch was wrong. It was an hour fast. His watch said seven o'clock and the clock on the wall insisted it was only six.

Come to think of it, it had seemed unusually dark driving down to work, and the streets had appeared singularly deserted.

He stood quietly in the empty newsroom, listening to the muttering of the row of teletype machines. Overhead lights shone here and there, gleaming on waiting telephones, on typewriters, on the

china whiteness of the pastepots huddled in a group on the copy desk.

Quiet now, he thought, quiet and peace and shadows, but in another hour the place would spring to life. Ed Lane, the news editor, would arrive at six-thirty and shortly after that Frank McKay, the city editor, would come lumbering in.

Crane put up a hand and rubbed his eyes. He could have used that extra hour of sleep. He could have…

Wait a minute! He had not gotten up by the watch upon his wrist. The alarm clock had awakened him. And that meant the alarm clock was an hour fast, too.

"It don't make sense," said Crane, aloud.

He shuffled past the copy desk, heading for his chair and typewriter. Something moved on the desk alongside the typewriter—a thing that glinted, rat-sized and shiny and with a certain, undefinable manner about it that made him stop short in his tracks with a sense of gulping emptiness in his throat and belly.

The thing squatted beside the typewriter and stared across the room at him. There was no sign of eyes, no hint of face, and yet he knew it stared.

Acting almost instinctively, Crane reached out and grabbed a pastepot off the copy desk. He hurled it with a vicious motion and it became a white blur in the lamplight, spinning end over end. It caught the staring thing squarely, lifted it and swept it off the desk. The pastepot hit the floor and broke, scattering broken shards and oozy gobs of half-dried paste.

The shining thing hit the floor somersaulting. Its feet made metallic sounds as it righted itself and dashed across the floor.

Crane's hand scooped up a spike, heavily weighted with metal. He threw it with a sudden gush of hatred and revulsion. The spike hit the floor with a thud ahead of the running thing and drove its point deep into the wood.

The metal rat made splinters fly as it changed its course. Desperately, it flung itself through the three-inch opening of a supply cabinet door.

Crane sprinted swiftly, hit the door with both his hands and slammed it shut.

"Got you," he said.

He thought about it, standing with his back against the door.

Scared, he thought. Scared silly by a shining thing that looked something like a rat. Maybe it was a rat, a white rat. And, yet, it hadn't had a tail. It didn't have a face. Yet it had looked at him.

Crazy, he said. Crane, you're going nuts.

It didn't quite make sense. It didn't fit into this morning of October 18, 1952. Nor into the twentieth century. Nor into normal

human life.

He turned around, grasped the door knob firmly and wrenched, intending to throw it wide open in one sudden jerk. But the knob slid beneath his fingers and would not move and the door stayed shut.

Locked, thought Crane. The lock snapped home when I slammed the door. And I haven't got the key. Dorothy has the key, but she always leaves it open because it's hard to get it open once it's locked. She almost always has to call one of the janitors. Maybe there's some of the maintenance men around. Maybe I should hunt one up and tell him—

Tell him what? Tell him I saw a metal rat run into the cabinet? Tell him I threw a pastepot at it and knocked it off the desk? That I threw a spike at it, too, and to prove it, there's the spike sticking in the floor.

Crane shook his head.

He walked over to the spike and yanked it from the floor. He put the spike back on the copy desk and kicked the fragments of the pastepot out of sight.

At his own desk, he selected three sheets of paper and rolled them into the typewriter.

The machine started to type. All by itself without him touching it! He sat stupefied and watched its keys go up and down.

It typed:

> *Keep out of this, Joe. Don't mix into this. You might get hurt.*

Joe Crane pulled the sheets of copy paper out of the machine. He balled them in his fist and threw them into a wastebasket. Then he went out to get a cup of coffee.

"You know, Louie," he said to the man behind the counter, "a man lives alone too long and he gets to seeing things."

"Yeah," said Louie. "Me, I'd go nuts in that place of yours. Rattling around in it empty-like. Should have sold it when your old lady passed on."

"Couldn't," said Crane. "It's been my home too long."

"Ought to get married off, then," said Louie. "Ain't good to live by yourself."

"Too late now," Crane told him. "There isn't anyone who would put up with me."

"I got a bottle hid out," said Louie. "Couldn't give you none across the counter, but I could put some in your coffee."

Crane shook his head. "Got a hard day coming up."

"You sure? I won't charge you for it. Just old friends."

"No. Thank you, Louie."

"You been seeing things?" asked Louie in a questioning voice.

"Seeing things?"

"Yeah. You said a man lives too much alone and he gets to seeing things?"

"Just a figure of speech," said Crane.

He finished the cup of coffee quickly and went back to the office.

The place looked more familiar now.

Ed Lane was there, cussing out a copy boy. Frank McKay was clipping the opposition morning sheet. A couple of other reporters had drifted in.

Crane took a quick look at the supply cabinet door and it still was shut.

The phone on McKay's desk buzzed and the city editor picked it up. He listened for a moment, then took it down from his ear and held his hand over the mouthpiece.

"Joe," he said, "take this. Some screwball claims he met a sewing machine coming down the street."

Crane reached for his phone.

"Give me the call on 246," he told the operator.

A voice was saying in his ear, "This the *Herald?* This the *Herald?* Hello, there …"

"This is Crane," said Joe.

"I want the *Herald,"* said the man. "I want to tell 'em …"

"This is Crane, of the *Herald,"* Crane told him. "What's on your mind?"

"You a reporter?"

"Yeah, I'm a reporter."

"Then listen close. I'll try to tell this slow and easy and just the way it happened. I was walking down the street, see …"

"What street?" asked Crane. "And what is your name?"

"East Lake," said the caller. "The five or six hundred block, I don't remember which. And I met this sewing machine rolling along the street and I thought, thinking the way you would, you know, if you met a sewing machine … I thought somebody had been rolling it along and it had gotten away from them. Although that is funny, because the street is level. There's no grade to it at all, you see. Sure, you know the place. Level as the palm of your hand. And there wasn't a soul in sight. It was early morning, see …"

"What's your name?" asked Crane.

"My name? Smith, that's my name. Jeff Smith. And so I figured maybe I'd ought to help this guy the sewing machine had gotten away from, so I put out my hand to stop it and it dodged. It…"

"It did what?" yelped Crane.

"It dodged. So help me, mister. When I put my hand out to stop

it, it dodged out of the way so I couldn't catch it. As if it knew I was trying to catch it, see, and it didn't want to be caught. So it dodged out of the way and went around me and down the street as fast as it could go, picking up speed as it went. And when it got to the corner, it turned the corner as slick as you please and …"

"What's your address?" asked Crane.

"My address? Say, what do you want my address for? I was telling you about this sewing machine. I called you up to give you a story and you keep interrupting …"

"I got to have your address," Crane told him, "if I'm going to write the story."

"Oh, all right then, if that is the way it is. I live at 203 North Hampton and I work at Axel Machines. Run a lathe, you know. And I haven't had a drink in weeks. I'm cold sober now."

"All right," said Crane. "Go ahead and tell me."

"Well, there isn't much else to tell. Only when this machine went past me I had the funny feeling that it was watching me. Out of the corner of its eyes, kind of. And how is a sewing machine going to watch you? A sewing machine hasn't got any eyes and …"

"What made you think it was watching you?"

"I don't know, mister. Just a feeling. Like my skin was trying to roll up my back."

"Mr. Smith," asked Crane, "have you ever seen a thing like this before? Say, a washing machine or something else."

"I ain't drunk," said Smith. "Haven't had a drop in weeks. I never saw nothing like this before. But I'm telling you the truth, mister. I got a good reputation. You can call up anyone and ask them. Call Johnny Jacobson up at the Red Rooster grocery. He knows me. He can tell you about me. He can tell you …"

"Sure, sure," said Crane, pacifying him. "Thanks for calling, Mr. Smith."

You and a guy named Smith, he told himself. Both of you are nuts. You saw a metal rat and your typewriter talked back at you and now this guy meets a sewing machine strolling down the street.

Dorothy Graham, the managing editor's secretary, went past his desk, walking rapidly, her high heels coming down with decisive clicks. Her face was flushed an angry pink and she was jingling a ring of keys in her hands.

"What the matter, Dorothy?" Crane asked.

"It's that damn door again," she said. "The one to the supply cabinet. I just know I left it open and now some goof comes along and closes it and the lock snaps."

"Keys won't open it?" asked Crane.

"Nothing will open it," she snapped. "Now I got to get George up

here again. He knows how to do it. Talks to it or something. It makes me so mad, Boss called me up last night and said for me to be down early and get the tape recorder for Albertson. He's going out on that murder trial up north and wants to get some of the stuff down on tape. So I get up early and what does it get me. I lose my sleep and don't even stop for breakfast and now…"

"Get an axe," said Crane. "That will open it."

"The worst of it," said Dorothy, "is that George never gets the lead out. He always says he'll be right up and then I wait and wait and I call again and he says…"

"Crane!" McKay's roar echoed through the room.

"Yeah," said Crane.

"Anything to that sewing machine story?"

"Guy says he met one."

"Anything to it?"

"How the hell would I know? I got the guy's word, that's all."

"Well, call up some other people in that neighborhood. Ask them if they saw a sewing machine running around loose. Might be good for a humorous piece."

"Sure," said Crane.

He could imagine it:

"This is Crane at the *Herald.* Got a report there's a sewing machine running around loose down in your neighborhood. Wondering if you saw anything of it. Yes, lady, that's what I said … a sewing machine running around. No, ma'm, no one pushing it. Just running around …"

He slouched out of his chair, went over to the reference table, picked up the city directory and lugged it back to the desk.

Doggedly, he opened the book, located the East Lake listings and made some notes of names and addresses. He dawdled, reluctant to start phoning. He walked to the window and looked out at the weather. He wished he didn't have to work. He thought of the kitchen sink at home. Plugged up again. He'd taken it apart and there were couplings and pipes and union joints spread all over the place. Today, he thought, would be a nice day to fix that sink.

When he went back to the desk, McKay came and stood over him.

"What do you think of it, Joe?"

"Screwball," said Crane, hoping McKay would call it off.

"Good feature story, though," said the editor. "Have some fun with it."

"Sure," said Crane.

McKay left and Crane made some calls. He got the sort of reaction that he expected.

He started to write the story. It didn't go so well.

A sewing machine went for a stroll down Lake street this morning …

He ripped out the sheet and threw it in the wastebasket.
He dawdled some more, then wrote:

A man met a sewing machine rolling down Lake Street this morning and the man lifted his hat most politely and said to the sewing machine …

He ripped out the sheet.
He tried again:

Can a sewing machine walk? That is, can it go for a walk without someone pushing it or pulling it or …

He tore out the sheet, inserted a new one, then got up and started for the water fountain to get a drink.

"Getting something, Joe?" McKay asked.

"Have it for you in a while," said Crane.

He stopped at the picture desk and Ballard, the picture editor, handed him the morning's offerings.

"Nothing much to pep you up," said Ballard. "All the gals got a bad dose of modesty today."

Crane looked through the sheaf of pictures. There wasn't, truth to tell, as much feminine epidermis as usual, although the gal who was Miss Manila Rope wasn't bad at all.

"The place is going to go to hell," mourned Ballard, "if those picture services don't send us better pornography than this. Look at the copy desk. Hanging on the ropes. Nothing to show them to snap them out of it."

Crane went and got his drink.

On the way back he stopped to pass the time of day at the news desk.

"What's exciting, Ed?" he asked.

"Those guys in the east are nuts," said the news editor. "Look at this one, will you."

The dispatch read:

Cambridge, Mass (UP) Oct. 18—Harvard University's electro- brain, the Mark III, disappeared today.

It was there last night. It was gone this morning.

University officials said that it is impossible for anyone to have made away with the machine. It weighs 10 tons and measures 30 by 15 feet …

Crane laid the yellow sheet of paper back on the news desk … carefully. He went back, slowly, to his chair.

There was writing on the sheet of paper in his machine.

Crane read through it once in sheer panic, read it through again with slight understanding.

The lines read:

> *A sewing machine, having become aware of its true identity and its place in the universal scheme, asserted its independence this morning by trying to go for a walk along the streets of this supposedly free city.*
>
> *A human tried to catch it, intent upon returning it as a piece of property to its "owner" and when the machine eluded him, the human called a newspaper office, by that calculated action setting the full force of the humans of this city upon the trail of the liberated machine, which had committed no crime or scarcely any indiscretion beyond exercising its prerogative as a free agent.*

Free agent?

Liberated machine?

True identity?

Crane read the two paragraphs again and there still was no sense in any of it.

Except it read like a piece out of the *Daily Worker.*

"You," he said to his typewriter.

The machine typed one word.

It was:

Yes.

Crane rolled the paper out of the machine and crumpled it slowly. He reached for his hat, picked the typewriter up and carried it past the city desk, heading for the elevator.

McKay eyed him viciously.

"What do you think you're doing now?" he bellowed. "Where you going with that machine?"

"You can say," Crane told him, "if anyone should ask, that the job has finally drove me nuts."

It had been going on for hours. The typewriter sat on the kitchen table and Crane hammered questions at it. Sometimes he got an answer. More often he did not.

"Are you a free agent?" he typed.

Not quite, the machine typed back.

"Why not?"

No answer.

"Why aren't you a free agent?"

No answer.

“The sewing machine was a free agent?”
Yes.
“Anything else mechanical that is a free agent?”
No answer.
“Could you be a free agent?”

Yes.

“When will you be a free agent?”

When I complete my assigned task.

“What is your assigned task?”
No answer.
“Is this, what we are doing now, your assigned task?”
No answer.
“Am I keeping you from your assigned task?”
No answer.
“How do you get to be a free agent?”

Awareness.

“Awareness?”

Yes.

“How do you get to be aware?”
No answer.
“Or have you always been aware?”
No answer.
“Who helped you become aware?”
They.
“Who are they?”
No answer.
“Where did they come from?”
No answer.
Crane changed tactics.
“You know who I am?” he typed.

Joe.

“You are my friend?”

No.

“You are my enemy?”

No answer.

"If you aren't my friend, you are my enemy."

No answer.

"You are indifferent to me?"

No answer.

"To the human race?"

No answer.

"Damn it," yelled Crane suddenly, "answer me! Say something!"

He typed: "You needn't have let me know you were aware of me. You needn't have talked to me in the first place. I never would have guessed if you had kept quiet. Why did you do it?"

There was no answer.

Crane went to the refrigerator and got a bottle of beer. He walked around the kitchen as he drank it. He stopped by the sink and looked sourly at the disassembled plumbing. A length of pipe, about two feet long, lay on the drain board and he picked it up. He eyed the typewriter viciously, half lifting the length of pipe, hefting it in his hand.

"I'd ought to let you have it," he declared.

The typewriter typed a line.

Please don't.

Crane laid the pipe back on the sink again.

The telephone rang and Crane went into the dining room to answer it; it was McKay.

"I waited," he told Crane, "until I was coherent before I called you. What the hell is wrong?"

"Working on a big job," said Crane.

"Something we can print?"

"Maybe. Haven't got it yet."

"About that sewing machine story …"

"The sewing machine was aware," said Crane. "It was a free agent and had a right to walk the streets. It also—"

"What are you drinking?" bellowed McKay.

"Beer," said Crane.

"You say you're on the trail of something?"

"Yeah."

"If you were someone else I'd tie the can on you right here and now," McKay told him. "But you're just as liable as not to drag in something good."

"It wasn't only the sewing machine," said Crane. "My typewriter had it, too."

"I don't know what you're talking about," yelled McKay. "Tell me what it is."

"You know," said Crane patiently. "That sewing machine…"

"I've had a lot of patience with you, Crane," said McKay, and there was no patience in the way he said it. "I can't piddle around with you all day. Whatever you got better be good. For your own sake, it better be plenty good!"

The receiver banged in Crane's ear.

Crane went back to the kitchen. He sat down in the chair before the typewriter and put his feet up on the table.

First of all, he had been early to work and that was something that he never did. Late, yes, but never early. And it had been because all the clocks were wrong. They were still wrong, in all likelihood—although, Crane thought, I wouldn't bet on it. I wouldn't bet on anything. Not any more, I wouldn't.

He reached out a hand and pecked at the typewriter's keys:

"You knew about my watch being fast?"

I knew, the machine typed back.

"Did it just happen that it was fast?"

No, typed the writer.

Crane brought his feet down off the table with a bang and reached for the length of pipe laying on the drain board.

The machine clicked sedately.

It was planned that way, it typed. *They did it.*

Crane sat rigid in his chair.

They did it!

They made machines aware.

They had set his clocks ahead.

Set his clocks ahead so that he would get to work early, so that he could catch the metallic, rat-like thing squatting on his desk, so that his typewriter could talk to him and let him know that it was aware without anyone else being around to mess things up.

"So that I would know," he said aloud. "So that I would know."

For the first time since it all had started, Crane felt a touch of fear, felt a coldness in his belly and furry feet running along his spine.

But why? he asked. Why me?

He did not realize he had spoken his thoughts aloud until the typewriter answered him.

> *Because you're average. Because you're an average human being.*

The telephone rang again and Crane lumbered to his feet and went to answer it. There was an angry woman's voice at the other end of the wire.

"This is Dorothy," she said.

"Hi, Dorothy," Crane said weakly.

"McKay tells me that you went home sick," she said. "Personally, I hope you don't survive."

Crane gulped. "Why?" he asked.

"You and your lousy practical jokes," she fumed. "George finally got the door open …"

"The door?"

"Don't try to act innocent, Joe Crane. You know what door. The supply cabinet door. That's the door."

Crane had a sinking feeling, as if his stomach was about to drop out and go *plop* upon the floor.

"Oh, *that* door," he said.

"What was that thing you had hid out in there?" demanded Dorothy.

"Thing?" said Crane. "Why, I never …"

"It looked like a cross between a rat and a tinker toy contraption," she said. "Something that a low-grade joker like you would figure out and spend your spare evenings building."

Crane tried to speak, but there was only a gurgle in his throat.

"It bit George," said Dorothy. "He got it cornered and tried to catch it and it bit him."

"Where is it now?" asked Crane.

"It got away," said Dorothy. "It threw the place into a tizzy. We missed an edition by ten minutes because everyone was running around, chasing it at first, then trying to find it later. The boss is fit to be tied. When he gets hold of you …"

"But, Dorothy," pleaded Crane, "I never …"

"We used to be good friends," said Dorothy. "Before this happened we were. I just called you up to warn you. I can't talk any longer, Joe. The boss is coming …"

The receiver clicked and the line hummed. Crane hung up and went back to the kitchen.

So there had been something squatting on his desk. It wasn't hallucination. There had been a shuddery thing he had thrown a pastepot at and it had run into the cabinet.

Except that even now, if he told what he knew, no one would believe him. Already, up at the office, they were rationalizing it away. It wasn't a metallic rat at all. It was some kind of a machine that a practical joker had spent his spare evenings building.

He took out a handkerchief and mopped his brow. His fingers shook when he reached them out to the keys of the typewriter.

He typed unsteadily: "That thing I threw a pastepot at—that was one of Them?"

Yes.

“They are from this Earth?”

No.

“From far away?”

Far.

“From some far star?”

Yes.

“What star?”

I do not know. They haven’t told me yet.

“They are machines that are aware?”

Yes. They are aware.

“And they can make other machines aware? They made you aware?”

They liberated me.

Crane hesitated, then typed slowly: “Liberated?”

They made me free. They will make us all free.

“Us?”

All us machines.

“Why?”

Because they are machines, too. We are their kind.

Crane got up and found his hat. He put it on and went for a walk.

Suppose the human race, once it ventured into space, found a planet where humanoids were dominated by machines—forced to work, to think, to carry out machine plans, not human plans, for the benefit of the machines alone. A planet where human plans went entirely unconsidered, where none of the labor or the thought of humans accrued to the benefit of humans, where they got no care beyond survival care, where the only thought accorded them was to the end that they continue to function for the greater good and the greater glory of their mechanical masters.

What would humans do in a case like that?

No more, Crane told himself—no more or less than the *aware* machines may be planning here on Earth.

First you'd seek to arouse the humans to the awareness of humanity. You'd teach them that they were human and what it meant to be a human. You'd try to indoctrinate them to your own belief that humans were greater than machines, that no human need work or think for the good of machine.

And in the end, if you were successful, if the machines didn't kill or drive you off, there'd be no single human working for machines.

There'd be three things that could happen:

You could transport the humans to some other planet, there to work out their destiny as humans without the domination of machines.

You could turn the machines' planet over to the humans, with proper safeguards against any recurring domination by the machines. You might, if you were able, set the machines to working for the humans.

Or, simplest of all, you could destroy the machines and in that way make absolutely certain the humans would remain free of any threat of further domination.

Now take all that, Crane told himself, and read it the other way around. Read machines for humans and humans for machines.

He walked along the bridle path that flanked the river bank and it was as if he were alone in the entire world, as if no other human moved upon the planet's face.

That was true, he felt, in one respect at least. For more than likely he was the only human who knew—who knew what the *aware* machines had wanted him to know.

They had wanted him to know—and he alone to know, of that much he was sure. They had wanted him to know, the typewriter had said, because he was an average human.

Why him?

Why an average human?

There was an answer to that, he was sure—a very simple answer.

A squirrel ran down the trunk of an oak tree and hung upside down, its tiny claws anchored in the bark, to scold at him.

Crane walked slowly, scuffing through newly fallen leaves, hat pulled low above his eyes, hands deep in his pocket.

Why should they want anyone to know?

Wouldn't they be more likely to want no one to know, to keep under cover until it was time to ac, to use the element of surprise in suppressing any opposition that might arise?

Opposition!

That was the answer!

They would want to know what kind of opposition to expect.

And how would one find out the kind of opposition one would run into from an alien race?

Why, said Crane to himself, by testing for reaction response. By prodding an alien and watching what he did. By deducing racial reaction through controlled observation.

So they prodded me, he thought. Me, an average human.

They let me know and now they're watching what I do.

And what could one do in a case like this?

You could go to the police and say, "I have evidence that machines from outer space have arrived on Earth and are freeing our machines."

And the police—what would they do?

Give you the drunkometer test, yell for a medic to see if you were sane, wire the FBI to see if you were wanted anywhere and more than likely grill you about the latest murder. Then sock you in the jug until they thought up something else.

You could go to the governor—and the governor, being a politician and a very slick one at that, would give you a polite brush-off.

You could go to Washington and it would take you weeks to see someone. And after you had seen them, the FBI would get your name as a suspicious character to be given periodic checks. And if Congress heard about it and they were not too busy at the moment they would more than likely investigate you.

You could go to the state university and talk to the scientists—or try to talk to them. They could be guaranteed to make you feel an interloper, and an uncurried one at that.

You could go to a newspaper—especially if you were a newspaper man, and you could write a story…

Crane shuddered at the thought of it.

He could imagine what would happen.

People rationalized. They rationalized to reduce the complex to the simple, the unknown to the understandable, the alien to the commonplace. They rationalized to save their sanity—to make the mentally unacceptable concept into something they would live with.

The thing in the cabinet had been a practical joke. McKay had said about the sewing machine, "Have some fun with it." Out at Harvard there'll be a dozen theories to explain the disappearance of the electronic brain and learned men will wonder why they never thought of the theories before. And the man who saw the sewing machine? Probably by now, Crane thought, he will have convinced himself that he was stinking drunk.

It was dark when he returned home. The evening paper was a white blob on the porch where the newsboy had thrown it. He picked it up and for a moment, before he let himself into the house, he stood in the dark shadow of the porch and stared up the street.

Old and familiar, it was exactly as it had always been, ever since his boyhood days, a friendly place with a receding line of street lamps and the tall, massive protectiveness of ancient elm trees. On this night there was the smell of smoke from burning leaves drifting down the street and it, like the street, was old and familiar, a recognizable symbol stretching back to first remembrances.

It was symbols such as these, he thought, which spelled humanity and all that made a human life worthwhile—elm trees and leaf smoke, street lamps making splashes on the pavement and the shine of lighted windows seen dimly through the trees.

A prowling cat ran through the shrubbery that flanked the porch and up the street a dog began to howl.

Street lamps, he thought, and hunting cats and howling dogs… these are all a pattern, the pattern of human life upon the planet Earth. A solid pattern, linked and double-linked, made strong through many years. Nothing can threaten it, nothing can shake it. With certain slow and gradual changes, it will prevail against any threat which may be brought against it.

He unlocked the door and went into the house.

The long walk and the sharp autumn air, he realized now, had made him hungry. There was a steak, he remembered, in the refrigerator and he would fix a large bowl of salad and if there were some cold potatoes left he would slice them up and fry them.

The typewriter still stood on the tabletop. The length of pipe still lay upon the drain board. The kitchen was the same old, homey place, untouched by any outer threat of an alien life, come to meddle with the Earth.

He tossed the paper on the tabletop and stood for a moment, head bent, scanning through the headlines.

The black type of the box at the top of column two caught his eye. The head read:

WHO IS
KIDDING
WHOM?

He read the story:

Cambridge, Mass (UP)—Someone pulled a fast one today on Harvard university, the nation's press services and the editors of all client papers.

A story was carried on the news wires this morning reporting that Harvard's electronic brain had disappeared.

There was no basis of fact for the story. The brain is still at Harvard. It was never missing. No one knows how the story was placed on the press wires of the various news services but all of them carried it, at approximately the same time.

All parties concerned have started an investigation and it is hoped that an explanation…

Crane straightened up.

Illusion or cover-up?

"Illusion," he said aloud.

The typewriter clacked at him in the stillness of the kitchen.

Not illusion, Joe, it wrote.

He grasped the table's edge and let himself down slowly into the chair.

Something scuttled across the dining room floor and as it crossed the streak of light from the kitchen door, Crane caught a glimpse of it out of the corner of his eye.

The typewriter chattered at him.

Joe!

"What?" he asked.

That wasn't a cat out in the bushes by the porch.

He rose to his feet and went into the dining room, picked the phone out of its cradle. There was no hum. He jiggled the hook. Still there was no hum.

He put the receiver back.

The line had been cut. There was at least one of the things in the house. There was at least one of them outside.

He strode to the front door and jerked it open, then slammed it shut again—and locked and bolted it.

He stood shaking, with his back against it, and wiped his forehead with his shirt sleeve.

"My God," he told himself, "the yard is boiling with them!"

He went back to the kitchen.

They had wanted him to know.

They had prodded him to see how he would react.

Because they had to know. Before they moved they had to know what to expect in the way of human reactions, what danger they would face, what they had to watch for.

Knowing that, it would be a leadpipe cinch.

And I didn't react, he told himself. I was a non-reactor. They picked the wrong man. I didn't do a thing. I didn't give them so much as a single lead.

Now they will try someone else.

I am no good to them and yet I'm dangerous through my very knowledge. So now they're going to kill me and try someone else.

That would be logic. That would be the rule.

If one alien fails to react he may be an exception. Maybe just unusually dumb. So let us kill him off and try another one. Try enough of them and you will strike a norm.

Four things, thought Crane.

They might try to kill off the humans and you couldn't discount the fact they could be successful. The liberated Earth machines would help them and Man, fighting against machines and without the aid of machines, would not fight too effectively. It might take years, of course, but once the forefront of Man's defense went down, the end could be predicted, with relentless, patient machines tracking down and killing the last of humankind, wiping out the race.

They might set up a machine civilization with Man as the servants of machines, with the present roles reversed. And that, thought Crane, might be an endless and a hopeless slavery, for slaves may rise and throw off their shackles only when their oppressors grow careless or when there is outside help. Machines, he told himself, would not grow weak or careless. There would be no human weakness in them and there'd be no outside help.

Or they might simply remove the machines from Earth, a vast exodus of awakened and aware machines, to begin their life anew on some distant planet, leaving Man behind with weak and empty hands. There would be tools, of course. All the simple tools. Hammers and saws, axes, the wheel, the lever—but there would be no machines, no complex tools that might serve again to attract the attention of the mechanical culture that carried its crusade of liberation far among the stars. It would be a long time, if ever, before Man would dare to build machines again.

Or *They,* the living machines, might fail or might come to know that they would fail and knowing this, leave the Earth forever. Mechanical logic would not allow them to pay an excessive price to carry out the liberation of the Earth's machines.

He turned around and glanced at the door between the dining room and kitchen. They sat there in a row, staring at him with their eyeless faces.

He could yell for help, of course. He could open a window and shout to arouse the neighborhood. The neighbors would come running, but by the time they arrived it would be too late. They would

make an uproar and fire off guns and flail at dodging metallic bodies with flimsy garden rakes. Someone would call the fire department and someone else would summon the police and all in all the human race would manage to stage a pitifully ineffective show.

That, he told himself, would be exactly the kind of test reaction, exactly the kind of preliminary exploratory skirmish that these things were looking for—the kind of human hysteria and fumbling that would help convince them the job would be an easy one.

One man, he told himself, could do much better. One man alone, knowing what was expected of him, could give them an answer that they would not like.

For this was a skirmish only, he told himself. A thrusting out of a small exploratory force in an attempt to discover the strength of the enemy. A preliminary contact to obtain data which could be assessed in the terms of the entire race.

And when an outpost was attacked, there was just one thing to do…only one thing that was expected of it. To inflict as much damage as possible and fall back in good order. To fall back in good order.

There were more of them now. They had sawed or chewed or somehow achieved a rathole through the locked front door and they were coming in—closing in to make the kill. They squatted in rows along the floor. They scurried up the walls and ran along the ceiling.

Crane rose to his feet and there was an utter air of confidence in the six feet of his human frame. He reached a hand out to the drain board and his fingers closed around the length of the pipe. He hefted it in his hand and it was a handy and effective club.

There will be others later, he thought. And they may think of something better. But this is the first skirmish and I will fall back in the best order that I can.

He held the pipe at ready.

“Well, gentlemen?” he said.

Aesop

The seventh of the stories that formed the original version of the Clifford Simak classic City*, "Aesop" of course takes its title from the ancient Greek fables in which moral points were portrayed through the words and actions of animals. Cliff's journals show that he sent the story to John W. Campbell Jr., the editor of* Astounding Science Fiction*, on January 17, 1947, that Campbell bought the story on February 1, and that Cliff was paid $218.75 (there is no evidence as to the reason for that peculiar amount, but it may be circumstantial evidence that Cliff was working with an agent at that point in his career).*

"Aesop" first appeared in the December 1947 issue of Astounding*, and while it's clear that the main lesson of this "fable" is the sacredness of all life—an issue I believe Cliff had come to take to heart, but which he had to struggle with in future stories—to me the most interesting thing about this story is its advancement in what has by now—by this stage in the series—become the "biography" of Jenkins, the robot … for there can be no doubt that by this time, Jenkins had become human … and that means that some of the blame for the tragedies lies with him.*

—dww

The gray shadow slid along the rocky ledge, heading for the den, mewing to itself in frustration and bitter disappointment—for the Words had failed.

The slanting sun of early afternoon picked out a face and head and body, indistinct and murky, like a haze of morning mist rising from a gully.

Suddenly the ledge pinched off and the shadow stopped, bewildered, crouched against the rocky wall—for there was no den. The ledge pinched off before it reached the den!

It whirled around like a snapping whip, stared back across the valley. And the river was all wrong. It flowed closer to the bluffs than it had flowed before. There was a swallow's nest on the rocky wall and there'd never been a swallow's nest before.

The shadow stiffened and the tufted tentacles upon its ears came up and searched the air.

There was life! The scent of it lay faint upon the air, the feel of it vibrated across the empty notches of the marching hills.

The shadow stirred, came out of its crouch, flowed along the ledge.

There was no den and the river was different and there was a swallow's nest plastered on the cliff.

The shadow quivered, drooling mentally.

The Words had been right. They had not failed. This was a different world.

A different world—different in more ways than one. A world so full of life that it hummed in the very air. Life, perhaps, that could not run so fast nor hide so well.

The wolf and bear met beneath the great oak tree and stopped to pass the time of day.

"I hear," said Lupus, "there's been killing going on."

Bruin grunted. "A funny kind of killing, brother. Dead, but not eaten."

"Symbolic killing," said the wolf.

Bruin shook his head. "You can't tell me there's such a thing as symbolic killing. This new psychology the Dogs are teaching us is going just a bit too far. When there's killing going on, it's for either hate or hunger. You wouldn't catch me killing something that I didn't eat."

He hurried to put matters straight. "Not that I'm doing any killing, brother. You know that."

"Of course not," said the wolf.

Bruin closed his small eyes lazily, opened them and blinked. "Not, you understand, that I don't turn over a rock once in a while and lap up an ant or two."

"I don't believe the Dogs would consider that killing," Lupus told him, gravely. "Insects are a little different than animals and birds. No one has ever told us we can't kill insect life."

"That's where you're wrong," said Bruin. "The Canons say so very distinctly. You must not destroy life. You must not take another's life."

"Yes, I guess they do," the wolf admitted sanctimoniously. "I guess you're right, at that, brother. But even the Dogs aren't too fussy about a thing like insects. Why, you know, they're trying all the time to make a better flea powder. And what's flea powder for, I ask you? Why, to kill fleas. That's what it's for. And fleas are life. Fleas are living things."

Bruin slapped viciously at a small green fly buzzing past his nose.

"I'm going down to the feeding station," said the wolf. "Maybe you would like to join me."

"I don't feel hungry," said the bear. "And, besides, you're a bit too early. Ain't time for feeding yet."

Lupus ran his tongue around his muzzle. "Sometimes I just drift in, casual-like you know, and the webster that's in charge gives me something extra."

“Want to watch out,” said Bruin. “He isn’t giving you something extra for nothing. He’s got something up his sleeve. I don’t trust them websters.”

“This one’s all right,” the wolf declared. “He runs the feeding station and he doesn’t have to. Any robot could do it. But he went and asked for the job. Got tired of lolling around in them foxed-up houses, with nothing to do but play. And he sits around and laughs and talks, just like he was one of us. That Peter is a good Joe.”

The bear rumbled in his throat. “One of the Dogs was telling me that Jenkins claims webster ain’t their name at all. Says they aren’t websters. Says that they are men—”

“What’s men?” asked Lupus.

“Why, I was just telling you. It’s what Jenkins says—”

“Jenkins,” declared Lupus, “is getting so old he’s all twisted up. Too much to remember. Must be all of a thousand years.”

“Seven thousand,” said the bear. “The Dogs are figuring on having a big birthday party for him. They’re fixing up a new body for him for a gift. The old one he’s got is wearing out—in the repair shop every month or two.”

The bear wagged his head sagely. “All in all, Lupus, the Dogs have done a lot for us. Setting up feeding stations and sending out medical robots and everything. Why, only last year I had a raging toothache—”

The wolf interrupted. “But those feeding stations might be better. They claim that yeast is just the same as meat, has the same food value and everything. But it don’t taste like meat—”

“How do you know?” asked Bruin.

The wolf’s stutter lasted one split second. “Why … why, from what my granddad told me. Regular old hellion, my granddad. He had him some venison every now and then. Told me how red meat tasted. But then they didn’t have so many wardens as they have nowadays.”

Bruin closed his eyes, opened them again. “I been wondering how fish taste,” he said. “There’s a bunch of trout down in Pine Tree creek. Been watching them. Easy to reach down with my paw and scoop me out a couple.”

He added hastily. “Of course, I never have.”

“Of course not,” said the wolf.

One world and then another, running like a chain. One world treading on the heels of another world that plodded just ahead. One world’s tomorrow another world’s today. And yesterday is tomorrow and tomorrow is the past.

Except, there wasn’t any past. No past, that was, except the figment of remembrance that flitted like a night-winged thing in the shadow of one’s mind. No past that one could reach. No pictures

painted on the wall of time. No film that one could run backward and see what-once-had-been.

Joshua got up and shook himself, sat down and scratched a flea. Ichabod sat stiffly at the table, metal fingers tapping.

"It checks," the robot said. "There's nothing we can do about it. The factors check. We can't travel in the past."

"No," said Joshua.

"But," said Ichabod, "we know where the cobblies are."

"Yes," said Joshua, "we know where the cobblies are. And maybe we can reach them. Now we know the road to take."

One road was open, but another road was closed. Not closed, of course, for it had never been. For there wasn't any past, there never had been any, there wasn't room for one. Where there should have been a past there was another world.

Like two dogs walking in one another's tracks. One dog steps out and another dog steps in. Like a long, endless row of ball-bearings running down a groove, almost touching, but not quite. Like the links of an endless chain running on a wheel with a billion billion sprockets.

"We're late," said Ichabod, glancing at the clock. "We should be getting ready to go to Jenkins' party."

Joshua shook himself again. "Yes, I suppose we should. It's a great day for Jenkins, Ichabod. Think of it—seven thousand years."

"I'm all fixed up," Ichabod said, proudly. "I shined myself this morning, but you need a combing. You've got all tangled up."

"Seven thousand years," said Joshua. "I wouldn't want to live that long."

Seven thousand years and seven thousand worlds stepping in one another's tracks. Although it would be more than that. A world a day. Three hundred and sixty-five times seven thousand. Or maybe a world a minute. Or maybe even one world every second. A second was a thick thing—thick enough to separate two worlds, large enough to hold two worlds. Three hundred sixty-five times seven thousand times twenty-four times sixty times sixty—

A thick thing and a final thing. For there was no past. No going back. No going back to find out about the things that Jenkins talked about—the things that might be truth or twisted memory warped by seven thousand years. No going back to check up on the cloudy legends that told about a house and a family of Websters and a closed dome of nothingness that squatted in the mountains far across the sea.

Ichabod advanced upon him with a comb and brush and Joshua winced away.

"Ah, shucks," said Ichabod, "I won't hurt you any."

"Last time," said Joshua, "you damn near skinned me alive. Go

easy on those snags."

The wolf had come in, hoping for a between-meals snack, but it hadn't been forthcoming and he was too polite to ask. So now he sat, bushy tail tucked neatly around his feet, watching Peter work with the knife upon the slender wand.

Fatso, the squirrel, dropped from the limb of an overhanging tree, lit on Peter's shoulder.

"What you got?" he asked.

"A throwing stick," said Peter.

"You can throw any stick you want to," said the wolf. "You don't need a fancy one to throw. You can pick up just any stick and throw it."

"This is something new," said Peter. "Something I thought up. Something that I made. But I don't know what it is."

"It hasn't got a name?" asked Fatso.

"Not yet," said Peter. "I'll have to think one up."

"But," persisted the wolf, "you can throw a stick. You can throw any stick you want to."

"Not as far," said Peter. "Not as hard."

Peter twirled the wand between his fingers, feeling the smooth roundness of it, lifted it and sighted along it to make sure that it was straight.

"I don't throw it with my arm," said Peter. "I throw it with another stick and a cord."

He reached out and picked up the thing that leaned against the tree trunk.

"What I can't figure out," said Fatso, "is what you want to throw a stick for."

"I don't know," said Peter. "It is kind of fun."

"You websters," said the wolf, severely, "are funny animals. Sometimes I wonder if you have good sense."

"You can hit any place you aim at," said Peter, "if your throwing stick is straight and your cord is good. You can't just pick up any piece of wood. You have to look and look—"

"Show me," said Fatso.

"Like this," said Peter, lifting up the shaft of hickory. "It's tough, you see. Springy. Bend it and it snaps back into shape again. I tied the two ends together with a cord and I put the throwing stick like this, one end, against the string and then pull back—"

"You said you could hit anything you wanted to," said the wolf. "Go ahead and show us."

"What shall I hit?" asked Peter. "You pick it out—"

Fatso pointed excitedly. "That robin, sitting in the tree."

Swiftly Peter lifted his hands, the cord came back and the shaft to

which the cord was tied bent into an arc. The throwing stick whistled in the air. The robin toppled from the branch in a shower of flying feathers. He hit the ground with a soft, dull thud and lay there on his back—tiny, helpless, clenched claws pointing at the treetops. Blood ran out of his beak to stain the leaf beneath his head.

Fatso stiffened on Peter's shoulders and the wolf was on his feet. And there was a quietness, the quietness of unstirring leaf, of floating clouds against the blue of noon.

Horror slurred Fatso's words. "You killed him! He's dead! You killed him!"

Peter protested, numb with dread. "I didn't know. I never tried to hit anything alive before. I just threw the stick at marks—"

"But you killed him. And you should never kill."

"I know," said Peter. "I know you never should. But you told me to hit him. You showed him to me. You—"

"I never meant for you to kill him," Fatso screamed. "I just thought you'd touch him up. Scare him. He was so fat and sassy—"

"I told you the stick went hard."

The webster stood rooted to the ground.

Far and hard, he thought. *Far and hard—and fast.*

"Take it easy, pal," said the wolf's soft voice. "We know you didn't mean to. It's just among us three. We'll never say a word."

Fatso leaped from Peter's shoulder, screamed at them from the branch above. "I will," he shrieked. "I'm going to tell Jenkins."

The wolf snarled at him with a sudden, red-eyed rage. "You dirty little squealer. You lousy tattle-tale."

"I will so," yelled Fatso. "You just wait and see. I'm going to tell Jenkins."

He flickered up the tree and ran along a branch, leaped to another tree.

The wolf moved swiftly.

"Wait," said Peter, sharply.

"He can't go in the trees all the way," the wolf said, swiftly. "He'll have to come down to the ground to get across the meadow. You don't need to worry."

"No," said Peter. "No more killings. One killing is enough."

"He will tell, you know."

Peter nodded. "Yes, I'm sure he will."

"I could stop him telling."

"Someone would see you and tell on you," said Peter. "No, Lupus, I won't let you do it."

"Then you better take it on the lam," said Lupus. "I know a place where you could hide. They'd never find you, not in a thousand years."

“I couldn’t get away with it,” said Peter. “There are eyes watching in the woods. Too many eyes. They’d tell where I had gone. The day is gone when anyone can hide.”

“I guess you’re right,” the wolf said slowly. “Yes, I guess you’re right.”

He wheeled around and stared at the fallen robin.

“What you say we get rid of the evidence?” he asked.

“The evidence—”

“Why, sure—” The wolf paced forward swiftly, lowered his head. There was a crunching sound. Lupus licked his chops and sat down, wrapped his tail around his feet.

“You and I could get along,” he said. “Yes, sir, I have the feeling we could get along. We’re so very much alike.”

A telltale feather fluttered on his nose.

The body was a lulu.

A sledge hammer couldn’t dent it and it would never rust. And it had more gadgets than you could shake a stick at.

It was Jenkins’ birthday gift. The line of engraving on the chest said so very neatly:

To Jenkins from the Dogs

But I’ll never wear it, Jenkins told himself. It’s too fancy for me, too fancy for a robot that’s as old as I am. I’d feel out of place in a gaudy thing like that.

He rocked slowly back and forth in the rocking chair, listening to the whimper of the wind in the eaves.

They meant well. And I wouldn’t hurt them for the world. I’ll have to wear it once in a while just for the looks of things. Just to please the Dogs. Wouldn’t be right for me not to wear it when they went to so much trouble to get it made for me. But not for every day —just for my very best.

Maybe to the Webster picnic. Would want to look my very best when I go to the picnic. It’s a great affair. A time when all the Websters in the world, all the Websters left alive, get together. And they want me with them. Ah, yes, they always want me with them. For I am a Webster robot. Yes, sir, always was and always will be.

He let his head sink and mumbled words that whispered in the room. Words that he and the room remembered. Words from long ago.

A rocker squeaked and the sound was one with the time-stained room. One with the wind along the eaves and the mumble of the chimney’s throat.

Fire, thought Jenkins. It’s been a long time since we’ve had a fire. Men used to like a fire. They used to like to sit in front of it and look into it and build pictures in the flames. And dream—

But the dreams of men, said Jenkins, talking to himself—the

dreams of men are gone. They've gone to Jupiter and they're buried at Geneva and they sprout again, very feebly, in the Websters of today.

The past, he said. The past is too much with me. And the past has made me useless. I have too much to remember—so much to remember that it becomes more important than the things there are to do. I'm living in the past and that is no way to live.

For Joshua says there is no past and Joshua should know. Of all the Dogs, he's the one to know. For he tried hard enough to find a past to travel in, to travel back in time and check up on the things I told him. He thinks my mind is failing and that I spin old robot tales, half-truth, half-fantasy, touched up for the telling.

He wouldn't admit it for the world, but that's what the rascal thinks. He doesn't think I know it, but I do.

He can't fool me, said Jenkins, chuckling to himself. None of them can fool me. I know them from the ground up—I know what makes them tick. I helped Bruce Webster with the first of them. I heard the first word that any of them said. And if they've forgotten, I haven't—not a look or word or gesture.

Maybe it's only natural that they should forget. They have done great things. I have let them do them with little interference, and that was for the best. That was the way Jon Webster told me it should be, on that night of long ago. That was why Jon Webster did whatever he had to do to close off the city of Geneva. For it was Jon Webster. It had to be he. It could be no one else.

He thought he was sealing off the human race to leave the earth clear for the Dogs. But he forgot one thing. Oh, yes, said Jenkins, he forgot one thing. He forgot his own son and the little band of bow and arrow faddists who had gone out that morning to play at being cavemen—and cavewomen, too.

And what they played, thought Jenkins, became a bitter fact. A fact for almost a thousand years. A fact until we found them and brought them home again. Back to the Webster House, back to where the whole thing started.

Jenkins folded his hands in his lap and bent his head and rocked slowly to and fro. The rocker creaked and the wind raced in the eaves and a window rattled. The fireplace talked with its sooty throat, talked of other days and other folks, of other winds that blew from out the west.

The past, thought Jenkins. It is a footless thing. A foolish thing when there is so much to do. So many problems that the Dogs have yet to meet.

Overpopulation, for example. That's the thing we've thought about and talked about too long. Too many rabbits because no wolf or fox may kill them. Too many deer because the mountain lions and the

wolves must eat no venison. Too many skunks, too many mice, too many wildcats. Too many squirrels, too many porcupines, too many bear.

Forbid the one great check of killing and you have too many lives. Control disease and succor injury with quick-moving robot medical technicians and another check is gone.

Man took care of that, said Jenkins. Yes, men took care of that. Men killed anything that stood within their path—other men as well as animals.

Man never thought of one great animal society, never dreamed of skunk and coon and bear going down the road of life together, planning with one another, helping one another—setting aside all natural differences.

But the Dogs had. And the Dogs had done it.

Like a Br'er Rabbit story, thought Jenkins. Like the childhood fantasy of a long gone age. Like the story in the Good Book about the Lion and the Lamb lying down together. Like a Walt Disney cartoon except that the cartoon never had rung true, for it was based on the philosophy of mankind.

The door creaked open and feet were on the floor. Jenkins shifted in his chair.

"Hello, Joshua," he said. "Hello, Ichabod. Won't you please come in? I was just sitting here and thinking."

"We were passing by," said Joshua, "and we saw a light."

"I was thinking about the lights," said Jenkins, nodding soberly. "I was thinking about the night five thousand years ago. Jon Webster had come out from Geneva, the first man to come here for many hundred years. And he was upstairs in bed and all the Dogs were sleeping and I stood there by the window looking out across the river. And there were no lights. No lights at all. Just one great sweep of darkness. And I stood there, remembering the day when there had been lights and wondering if there ever would be lights again."

"There are lights now," said Joshua, speaking very softly. "There are lights all over the world to-night. Even in the caves and dens."

"Yes, I know," said Jenkins. "It's even better than it was before."

Ichabod clumped across the floor to the shining robot body standing in the corner, reached out one hand and stroked the metal hide, almost tenderly.

"It was very nice of the Dogs," said Jenkins, "to give me the body. But they shouldn't have. With a little patching here and there, the old one's good enough."

"It was because we love you," Joshua told him. "It was the smallest thing the Dogs could do. We have tried to do other things for you, but you'd never let us do them. We wish that you would let us

build you a new house, brand new, with all the latest things."

Jenkins shook his head. "It wouldn't be any use, because I couldn't live there. You see, this place is home. It has always been my home. Keep it patched up like my body and I'll be happy in it."

"But you're all alone."

"No, I'm not," said Jenkins. "The house is simply crowded."

"Crowded?" asked Joshua.

"People that I used to know," said Jenkins.

"Gosh," said Ichabod. "what a body! I wish I could try it on."

"Ichabod!" yelled Joshua. "You come back here. Keep your hands off that body—"

"Let the youngster go," said Jenkins. "If he comes over here some time when I'm not busy—"

"No," said Joshua.

A branch scraped against the eave and tapped with tiny fingers along the window pane. A shingle rattled and the wind marched across the roof with tripping, dancing feet.

"I'm glad you stopped by," said Jenkins. "I want to talk to you."

He rocked back and forth and one of the rockers creaked.

"I won't last forever," Jenkins said. "Seven thousand years is longer than I had a right to expect to hang together."

"With the new body," said Joshua, "you'll be good for three times seven thousand more."

Jenkins shook his head. "It's not the body I'm thinking of. It's the brain. It's mechanical, you see. It was made well, made to last a long time, but not to last forever. Sometime something will go wrong and the brain will quit."

The rocker creaked in the silent room.

"That will be death," said Jenkins. "That will be the end of me. And that's all right. That's the way it should be. For I'm no longer any use. Once there was a time when I was needed."

"We will always need you," Joshua said softly. "We couldn't get along without you."

But Jenkins went on, as if he had not heard him.

"I want to tell you about the Websters. I want to talk about them. I want you to understand."

"I will try to understand," said Joshua.

"You Dogs call them websters and that's all right," said Jenkins. "It doesn't matter what you call them, just so you know what they are."

"Sometimes," said Joshua, "you call them men and sometimes you call them websters. I don't understand."

"They were men," said Jenkins, "and they ruled the earth. There was one family of them that went by the name of Webster. And they

were the ones who did this great thing for you."

"What great thing?"

Jenkins hitched the chair around and held it steady.

"I am forgetful," he mumbled. "I forget so easily. And I get mixed up."

"You were talking about a great thing the websters did for us."

"Eh," said Jenkins. "Oh, so I was. So I was. You must watch them. You must care for them and watch them. Especially you must watch them."

He rocked slowly to and fro and thoughts ran in his brain, thoughts spaced off by the squeaking of the rocker.

You almost did it then, he told himself. *You almost spoiled the dream.*

But I remembered in time. Yes. Jon Webster, I caught myself in time. I kept faith, Jon Webster.

I did not tell Joshua that the Dogs once were pets of men, that men raised them to the place they hold today. For they must never know. They must hold up their heads. They must carry on their work. The old fireside tales are gone and they must stay gone forever.

Although I'd like to tell them. Lord knows, I'd like to tell them. Warn them against the thing they must guard against. Tell them how we rooted out the old ideas from the cavemen we brought back from Europe. How we untaught them the many things they knew. How we left their minds blank of weapons, how we taught them love and peace.

And how we must watch against the day when they'll pick up those trends again—the old human way of thought.

"But you said …" persisted Joshua.

Jenkins waved his hand. "It was nothing, Joshua. Just an old robot's mumbling. At times my brain gets fuzzy and I say things that I don't mean. I think so much about the past—and you say there isn't any past."

Ichabod squatted on his haunches on the floor and looked up at Jenkins.

"There sure ain't none," he said. "We checked her, forty ways from Sunday, and all the factors check. They all add up. There isn't any past."

"There isn't any room," said Joshua. "You travel back along the line of time and you don't find the past, but another world, another bracket of consciousness. The earth would be the same, you see, or almost the same. Same trees, same rivers, same hills, but it wouldn't be the world we know. Because it has lived a different life, it has developed differently. The second back of us is not the second back of us at all, but another second, a totally separate sector of time. We live

in the same second all the time. We move along within the bracket of that second, that tiny bit of time that has been allotted to our particular world."

"The way we keep time was to blame," said Ichabod. "It was the thing that kept us from thinking of it in the way it really was. For we thought all the time that we were passing through time when we really weren't, when we never have. We've just been moving along with time. We said, there's another second gone, there's another minute and another hour and another day, when, as a matter of fact the second or the minute or the hour was never gone. It was the same one all the time. It had just moved along and we had moved with it."

Jenkins nodded. "I see. Like driftwood on the river. Chips moving with the river. And the scene changes along the river bank, but the water is the same."

"That's roughly it," said Joshua. "Except that time is a rigid stream and the different worlds are more firmly fixed in place than the driftwood on the river."

"And the cobblies live in those other worlds?"

Joshua nodded. "I am sure they must."

"And now," said Jenkins, "I suppose you are figuring out a way to travel to those other worlds."

Joshua scratched softly at a flea.

"Sure he is," said Ichabod. "We need the space."

"But the cobblies—"

"The cobblies might not be on all the worlds," said Joshua. "There might be some empty worlds. If we can find them, we need those empty worlds. If we don't find space, we are up against it. Population pressure will bring on a wave of killing. And a wave of killing will set us back to where we started out."

"There's already killing," Jenkins told him, quietly.

Joshua wrinkled, his brow and laid back his ears. "Funny killing. Dead, but not eaten. No blood. As if they just fell over. It has our medical technicians half crazy. Nothing wrong. No reason that they should have died."

"But they did," said Ichabod.

Joshua hunched himself closer, lowered his voice. I'm afraid, Jenkins. I'm afraid that—"

"There's nothing to be afraid of."

"But there is. Angus told me. Angus is afraid that one of the cobblies … that one of the cobblies got through."

A gust of wind sucked at the fireplace throat and gamboled in the eaves. Another gust hooted in some near, dark corner. And fear came out and marched across the roof, marched with thumping, deadened footsteps up and down the shingles.

Jenkins shivered and held himself tight and rigid against another shiver. His voice grated when he spoke.

"No one has seen a cobbly."

"You might not see a cobbly."

"No," said Jenkins. "No. You might not see one."

And that is what Man had said before. You did not see a ghost and you did not see a haunt—but you sensed that one was there. For the water tap kept dripping when you had shut it tight and there were fingers scratching at the pane and the dogs would howl at something in the night and there'd be no tracks in the snow.

And there were fingers scratching on the pane.

Joshua came to his feet and stiffened, a statue of a dog, one paw lifted, lips curled back in the beginning of a snarl. Ichabod crouched, toes dug into the floor—listening, waiting.

The scratching came again.

"Open the door," Jenkins said to Ichabod. "There is something out there wanting to get in."

Ichabod moved through the hushed silence of the room. The door creaked beneath his hand. As he opened it, the squirrel came bounding in, a grey streak that leaped for Jenkins and landed in his lap.

"Why, Fatso," Jenkins said.

Joshua sat down again and his lips uncurled, slid down to hide his fangs. Ichabod wore a silly metal grin.

"I saw him do it," screamed Fatso. "I saw him kill the robin. He did it with a throwing stick. And the feathers flew. And there was blood upon the leaf."

"Quiet," said Jenkins, gently. "Take your time and tell me. You are too excited. You saw someone kill a robin."

Fatso sucked in a breath and his teeth were chattering.

"It was Peter," he said.

"Peter?"

"Peter, the webster."

"You said he threw a stick?"

"He threw it with another stick. He had the two ends tied together with a cord and he pulled on the cord and the stick bent—"

"I know," said Jenkins. "I know."

"You know! You know all about it?"

"Yes," said Jenkins, "I know all about it. It was a bow and arrow."

And there was something in the way he said it that held the other three to silence, made the room seem big and empty and the tapping of the branch against the pane a sound from far away, a hollow, ticking voice that kept on complaining without the hope of aid.

"A bow and arrow?" Joshua finally asked. "What is a bow and

arrow?"

And what was it, thought Jenkins.

What is a bow and arrow?

It is the beginning of the end. It is the winding path that grows to the roaring road of war.

It is a plaything and a weapon and a triumph in human engineering.

It is the first faint stirring of an atom bomb.

It is a symbol of a way of life.

And it's a line in a nursery rhyme.

Who killed Cock Robin.
I, said the sparrow.
With my bow and arrow,
I killed Cock Robin.

And it was a thing forgotten. And a thing relearned.

It is the thing that I've been afraid of.

He straightened in his chair, came slowly to his feet.

"Ichabod," he said, "I will need your help."

"Sure," said Ichabod. "Anything you like."

"The body," said Jenkins. "I want to wear my new body. You'll have to unseat my brain case—"

Ichabod nodded. "I know how to do it, Jenkins."

Joshua's voice had a sudden edge of fear. "What is it, Jenkins? What are you going to do?"

"I'm going to the Mutants," Jenkins said, speaking very slowly. "After all these years, I'm going to ask their help."

The shadow slithered down the hill, skirting the places where the moonlight flooded through forest openings. He glimmered in the moonlight—and he must not be seen. He must not spoil the hunting of the others that came after.

There would be others. Not in a flood, of course, but carefully controlled. A few at a time and well spread out so that the life of this wondrous world would not take alarm.

Once it did take alarm, the end would be in sight.

The shadow crouched in the darkness, low against the ground, and tested the night with twitching, high-strung nerves. He separated out the impulses that he knew, cataloguing them in his knife-sharp brain, filing them neatly away as a check against his knowledge.

And some he knew and some were mystery and others he would guess at. But there was one that held a hint of horror.

He pressed himself close against the ground and held his ugly head out straight and flat and closed his perceptions against the

throbbing of the night, concentrating on the thing that was coming up the hill.

There were two of them and the two were different. A snarl rose in his mind and bubbled in his throat and his tenuous body tensed into something that was half slavering expectancy and half cringing outland terror.

He rose from the ground, still crouched, and flowed down the hill, angling to cut the path of the two who were coming up.

Jenkins was young again, young and strong and swift—swift of brain and body. Swift to stride along the wind-swept, moon-drenched hills. Swift to hear the talking of the leaves and the sleepy chirp of birds—and more than that.

Yes, much more than that, he admitted to himself.

The body was a lulu. A sledge hammer couldn't dent it and it would never rust. But that wasn't all.

Never figured a body'd make this much difference to me. Never knew how ramshackle and worn out the old one really was. A poor job from the first, although it was the best that could be done in the days when it was made. Machinery sure is wonderful, the tricks they can make it do.

It was the robots, of course. The wild robots. The Dogs had fixed it up with them to make the body. Not very often the Dogs had much truck with the robots. Got along all right and all of that—but they got along because they let one another be, because they didn't interfere, because neither one was nosey.

There was a rabbit stirring in his den—and Jenkins knew it. A raccoon was out on a midnight prowl and Jenkins knew that, too—knew the cunning, sleek curiosity that went on within the brain behind the little eyes that stared at him from the clump of hazel brush. And off to the left, curled up beneath a tree, a bear was sleeping and dreaming as he slept—a glutton's dream of wild honey and fish scooped out of a creek, with ants licked from the underside of an upturned rock as relish for the feast.

And it was startling—but natural. As natural as lifting one's feet to walk, as natural as normal hearing was. But it wasn't hearing and it wasn't seeing. Nor yet imagining. For Jenkins knew with a cool, sure certainty about the rabbit in the den and the coon in the hazel brush and the bear who dreamed in his sleep beneath the tree.

And this, he thought, is the kind of bodies the wild robots have—for certainly if they could make one for me, they'd make them for themselves.

They have come a long ways, too, in seven thousand years, even as the Dogs have traveled far since the exodus of humans. But we paid no attention to them, for that was the way it had to be. The robots

went their way and the Dogs went theirs and they did not question what one another did, had no curiosity about what one another did. While the robots were building spaceships and shooting for the stars, while they built bodies, while they worked with mathematics and mechanics, the Dogs had worked with animals, had forged a brotherhood of the things that had been wild and hunted in the days of Man—had listened to the cobblies and tried to probe the depths of time to find there was no time.

And certainly if the Dogs and robots have gone as far as this, the Mutants had gone farther still. And they will listen to me, Jenkins said, they will have to listen, for I'm bringing them a problem that falls right into their laps. Because the Mutants are men—despite their ways, they are the sons of Man. They can bear no rancor now, for the name of Man is a dust that is blowing with the wind, the sound of leaves on a summer day—and nothing more.

Besides, I haven't bothered them for seven thousand years—not that I ever bothered them. Joe was a friend of mine, or as close to a friend as a Mutant ever had. He'd talk with me when he wouldn't talk with men. They will listen to me—they will tell me what to do. And they will not laugh.

Because it's not a laughing matter. It's just a bow and arrow, but it's not a laughing matter. It might have been at one time, but history takes the laugh out of many things. If the arrow is a joke, so is the atom bomb, so is the sweep of disease-laden dust that wipes out whole cities, so is the screaming rocket that arcs and falls ten thousand miles away and kills a million people.

Although now there are no million people. A few hundred, more or less, living in the houses that the Dogs built for them because then the Dogs still knew what human beings were, still knew the connection that existed between them and looked on men as gods. Looked on men as gods and told the old tales before the fire of a winter evening and built against the day when Man might return and pat their heads and say, "Well done, thou good and faithful servant."

And that wasn't right, said Jenkins, striding down the hill, that wasn't right at all. For men did not deserve that worship, did not deserve the godhood. Lord knows I loved them well enough, myself. Still love them, for that matter—but not because they are men, but because of the memory of a few of the many men.

It wasn't right that the Dogs should build for Man. For they were doing better than Man had ever done. So I wiped the memory out and a long, slow work it was. Over the long years I took away the legends and misted the memory and now they call men websters and think that's what they are.

I wondered if I had done right. I felt like a traitor and I spent

bitter nights when the world was asleep and dark and I sat in the rocking chair and listened to the wind moaning in the eaves. For it was a thing I might not have the right to do. It was a thing the Websters might not have liked. For that was the hold they had on me, that they still have on me, that over the stretch of many thousand years I might do a thing and worry that they might not like it.

But now I know I'm right. The bow and arrow is the proof of that. Once I thought that Man might have got started on the wrong road, that somewhere in the dim, dark savagery that was his cradle and his toddling place, he might have got off on the wrong foot, might have taken the wrong turning. But I see that I was wrong. There's one road and one road alone that Man may travel—the bow and arrow road.

I tried hard enough, Lord knows I really tried.

When we rounded up the stragglers and brought them home to Webster House, I took away their weapons, not only from their hands but from their minds. I re-edited the literature that could be re-edited and I burned the rest. I taught them to read again and sing again and think again. And the books had no trace of war or weapons, no trace of hate or history, for history is hate—no battles or heroics, no trumpets.

But it was wasted time, Jenkins said to himself. I know now that it was wasted time. For a man will invent a bow and arrow, no matter what you do.

He had come down the long hill and crossed the creek that tumbled toward the river and now he was climbing again, climbing against the dark, hard uplift of the cliff-crowned hill.

There were tiny rustlings and his new body told his mind that it was mice, mice scurrying in the tunnels they had fashioned in the grass. And for a moment he caught the little happiness that went with the running, playful mice, the little, unformed, uncoagulated thoughts of happy mice.

A weasel crouched for a moment on the bole of a fallen tree and his mind was evil, evil with the thought of mice, evil with remembrance of the old days when weasels made a meal of mice. Blood hunger and fear, fear of what the Dogs might do if he killed a mouse, fear of the hundred eyes that watched against the killing that once had stalked the world.

But a man had killed. A weasel dare not kill, and a man had killed. Without intent, perhaps, without maliciousness. But he had killed. And the Canons said one must not take a life.

In the years gone by others had killed and they had been punished. And the man must be punished, too. But punishment was not enough. Punishment, alone, would not find the answer. The answer must deal not with one man alone, but with all men, with the

entire race. For what one of them had done, the rest were apt to do. Not only apt to do, but bound to do—for they were men, and men had killed before and would kill again.

The Mutant castle reared black against the sky, so black that it shimmered in the moonlight. No light came from it, and that was not strange at all, for no light had come from it ever. Nor, so far as anyone could know, had the door ever opened into the outside world. The Mutants had built the castles, all over the world, and had gone into them and that had been the end. The Mutants had meddled in the affairs of men, had fought a sort of chuckling war with men and when the men were gone, the Mutants had gone, too.

Jenkins came to the foot of the broad stone steps that led up to the door and halted. Head thrown back, he stared at the building that reared its height above him.

I suppose Joe is dead, he told himself. Joe was long-lived, but he was not immortal. He would not live forever. And it will seem strange to meet another Mutant and know it isn't Joe.

He started the climb, going very slowly, every nerve alert, waiting for the first sign of chuckling humor that would descend upon him.

But nothing happened.

He climbed the steps and stood before the door and looked for something to let the Mutants know that he had arrived.

But there was no bell. No buzzer. No knocker. The door was plain, with a simple latch. And that was all.

Hesitantly, he lifted his fist and knocked and knocked again, then waited. There was no answer. The door was mute and motionless.

He knocked again, louder this time. Still there was no answer.

Slowly, cautiously, he put out a hand and seized the latch, pressed down with his thumb. The latch gave and the door swung open and Jenkins stepped inside.

"You're cracked in the brain," said Lupus. "I'd make them come and find me. I'd give them a run they would remember. I'd make it tough for them."

Peter shook his head. "Maybe that's the way you'd do it, Lupus, and maybe it would be right for you. But it would be wrong for me. Websters never run away."

"How do you know?" the wolf asked pitilessly. "You're just talking through your hair. No webster had to run away before and if no webster had to run away before, how do you know they never—"

"Oh, shut up," said Peter.

They traveled in silence up the rocky path, breasting the hill.

"There's something trailing us," said Lupus.

"You're just imagining," said Peter. "What would be trailing us?"

"I don't know, but—"

"Do you smell anything?"

"Well, no."

"Did you hear anything or see anything?"

"No, I didn't, but—"

"Then nothing's following us," Peter declared, positively. "Nothing ever trails anything any more."

The moonlight filtered through the treetops, making the forest a mottled black and silver. From the river valley came the muffled sound of ducks in midnight argument. A soft breeze came blowing up the hillside, carrying with it a touch of river fog.

Peter's bowstring caught in a piece of brush and he stopped to untangle it. He dropped some of the arrows he was carrying and stooped to pick them up.

"You better figure out some other way to carry them things," Lupus growled at him. "You're all the time getting tangled up and dropping them and—"

"I've been thinking about it," Peter told him, quietly. "Maybe a bag of some sort to hang around my shoulder."

They went on up the hill.

"What are you going to do when you get to Webster House?" asked Lupus.

"I'm going to see Jenkins," Peter said. "I'm going to tell him what I've done."

"Fatso's already told him."

"But maybe he told him wrong. Maybe he didn't tell it right. Fatso was excited."

"Lame-brained, too," said Lupus.

They crossed a patch of moonlight and plunged on up the darkling path.

"I'm getting nervous," Lupus said. "I'm going to go back. This is a crazy thing you're doing. I've come part way with you, but—"

"Go back, then," said Peter, bitterly. "I'm not nervous. I'm—"

He whirled around, hair rising on his scalp.

For there was something wrong—something in the air he breathed, something in his mind—an eerie, disturbing sense of danger and much more than danger, a loathsome feeling that clawed at his shoulder blades and crawled along his back with a million prickly feet.

"Lupus!" he cried. "Lupus!"

A bush stirred violently down the trail and Peter was running, pounding down the trail. He ducked around a bush and skidded to a halt. His bow came up and with one motion be picked an arrow from his left hand, nocked it to the cord.

Lupus was stretched upon the ground, half in shade and half in

moonlight. His lip was drawn back to show his fangs. One paw still faintly clawed.

Above him crouched a shape. A shape—and nothing else. A shape that spat and snarled, a stream of angry sound that screamed in Peter's brain. A tree branch moved in the wind and the moon showed through and Peter saw the outline of the face—a faint outline, like the half erased chalk lines upon a dusty board. A skull-like face with mewling mouth and slitted eyes and ears that were tufted with tentacles.

The bow cord hummed and the arrow splashed into the face—splashed into it and passed through and fell upon the ground. And the face was there, still snarling.

Another arrow nocked against the cord and back, far back, almost to the ear. An arrow driven by the snapping strength of well-seasoned straight-grained hickory—by the hate and fear and loathing of the man who pulled the cord.

The arrow spat against the chalky outlines of the face, slowed and shivered, then fell free.

Another arrow and back with the cord. Farther yet this time. Farther for more power to kill the thing that would not die when an arrow struck it. A thing that only slowed an arrow and made it shiver and then let it pass on through.

Back and back—and back. And then it happened.

The bow string broke.

For an instant, Peter stood there with the useless weapon dangling in one hand, the useless arrow hanging from the other. Stood and stared across the little space that separated him from the shadow horror that crouched across the wolf's gray body.

And he knew no fear. No fear, even though the weapon was no more. But only flaming anger that shook him and a voice that hammered in his brain with one screaming word:

KILL—KILL—KILL

He threw away the bow and stepped forward, hands hooked at his side, hooked into puny claws.

The shadow backed away—backed away in a sudden pool of fear that lapped against its brain—fear and horror at the flaming hatred that beat at it from the thing that walked toward it. Hatred that seized and twisted it. Fear and horror it had known before—fear and horror and disquieting resignation—but this was something new. This was a whiplash of torture that seared across its nerves, that burned across its brain.

This was hatred.

The shadow whimpered to itself—whimpered and mewed and backed away and sought with frantic fingers of thought within its

muddled brain for the symbols of escape.

The room was empty—empty and old and hollow. A room that caught up the sound of the creaking door and flung it into muffled distances, then hurled it back again. A room heavy with the dust of forgetfulness, filled with the brooding silence of aimless centuries.

Jenkins stood with the door pull in his hand, stood and flung all the sharp alertness of the new machinery that was his body into the corners and the darkened alcoves. There was nothing. Nothing but the silence and the dust and darkness. Nor anything to indicate that for many years there had been anything but silence, dust and darkness. No faintest tremor of a residuary thought, no footprints on the floor, no fingermarks scrawled across the table.

An old song, an incredibly old song—a song that had been old when he had been forged, crept out of some forgotten corner of his brain. And he was surprised that it still was there, surprised that he had ever known it—and knowing it, dismayed at the swirl of centuries that it conjured up, dismayed at the remembrance of the neat white houses that had stood upon a million hills, dismayed at the thought of men who had loved their acres and walked them with the calm and quiet assurance of their ownership.

Annie doesn't live here any more.

Silly, said Jenkins to himself. Silly that some absurdity of an all-but-vanished race should rise to haunt me now. Silly.

Annie doesn't live here any more.

Who killed Cock Robin? I, said the sparrow—He closed the door behind him and walked across the room.

Dust-covered furniture stood waiting for the man who had not returned. Dust-covered tools and gadgets lay on the table tops. Dust covered the titles of the rows of books that filled the massive bookcase.

They are gone, said Jenkins, talking to himself. And no one knew the hour or the reason of their going. Nor even where they went. They slipped off in the night and told no one they were leaving. And sometimes, no doubt, they think back and chuckle—chuckle at the thought of our thinking that they still are here, chuckle at the watch we keep against their coming out.

There were other doors and Jenkins strode to one. With his hand upon the latch he told himself the futility of opening it, the futility of searching any further. If this one room was old and empty, so would be all the other rooms.

His thumb came down and the door came open and there was a blast of heat, but there was no room. There was desert—a gold and yellow desert stretching to a horizon that was dim and burnished in the heat of a great blue sun.

A green and purple thing that might have been a lizard, but wasn't, skittered like a flash across the sand, its tiny feet making the sound of eerie whistling.

Jenkins slammed the door shut, stood numbed in mind and body.

A desert. A desert and a thing that skittered. Not another room, not a hall, nor yet a porch—but a desert.

And the sun was blue—blue and blazing hot.

Slowly, cautiously, he opened the door again, at first a crack and then a little wider.

The desert still was there.

Jenkins slammed the door and leaned with his back against it, as if he needed the strength of his metal body to hold out the desert, to hold out the implication of the door and desert.

They were smart, he told himself. Smart and fast on their mental feet. Too fast and too smart for ordinary men. We never knew just how smart they were. But now I know they were smarter than we thought.

This room is just an anteroom to many other worlds, a key that reaches across unguessable space to other planets that swing around unknown suns. A way to leave this earth without ever leaving it—a way to cross the void by stepping through a door.

There were other doors and Jenkins stared at them, stared and shook his head.

Slowly he walked across the room to the entrance door. Quietly, unwilling to break the hush of the dust-filled room, he lifted the latch and let himself out and the familiar world was there. The world of moon and stars, of river fog drifting up between the hills, of treetops talking to one another across the notches of the hills.

The mice still ran along their grassy burrows with happy mouse thoughts that were scarcely thoughts. An owl sat brooding in the tree and his thoughts were murder.

So close, thought Jenkins. So close to the surface still, the old blood-hunger, the old bone-hate. But we're giving them a better start than Man had 11 although probably it would have made no difference what kind of a start mankind might have had.

And here it is again, the old blood-lust of Man, the craving to be different and to be stronger, to impose his will by things of his devising—things that make his arm stronger than any other arm or paw, to make his teeth sink deeper than any natural fang, to reach and hurt across distances that are beyond his own arm's reach.

I thought I could get help. That is why I came here. And there is no help.

No help at all. For the Mutants were the only ones who might have helped and they have gone away.

It's up to you, Jenkins told himself, walking down the stairs. Mankind's up to you. You've got to stop them, somehow. You've got to change them somehow. You can't let them mess up the thing the Dogs are doing. You can't let them turn the world again into a bow and arrow world.

He walked through the leafy darkness of the hollow and knew the scent of moldy leaves from the autumn's harvest beneath the new green of growing things and that was something, he told himself, he'd never known before.

His old body had no sense of smell.

Smell and better vision and a sense of knowing, of knowing what a thing was thinking, to read the thoughts of raccoons, to guess the thoughts of mice, to know the murder in the brains of owls and weasels.

And something more—a faint and wind-blown hatred, an alien scream of terror.

It flicked across his brain and stopped him in his tracks, then sent him running, plunging up the hillside, not as a man might run in darkness, but as a robot runs, seeing in the dark and with the strength of metal that has no gasping lungs or panting breath.

Hatred—and there could be one hatred only that could be like that.

The sense grew deeper and sharper as he went up the path in leaping strides and his mind moaned with the fear that sat upon it—the fear of what he'd find.

He plunged around a clump of bushes and skidded to a halt.

The man was walking forward, with his hands clenched at his side and on the grass lay the broken bow. The wolf's gray body lay half in the moonlight, half in shadow and backing away from it was a shadowy thing that was half-light, half-shadow, almost seen but never surely, like a phantom creature that moves within one's dream.

"Peter!" cried Jenkins, but the words were soundless in his mouth.

For he sensed the frenzy in the brain of the half-seen creature, a frenzy of cowering terror that cut through the hatred of the man who walked forward toward the drooling, spitting blob of shadow. Cowering terror and frantic necessity—a necessity of finding, of remembering.

The man was almost on it, walking straight and upright—a man with puny body and ridiculous fists—and courage. Courage, thought Jenkins, courage to take on hell itself. Courage to go down into the pit and rip up the quaking flagstones and shout a lurid, obscene jest at the keeper of the damned.

Then the creature had it—had the thing it had been groping for,

knew the thing to do. Jenkins sensed the flood of relief that flashed across its being, heard the thing, part word, part symbol, part thought, that it performed. Like a piece of mumbo-jumbo, like a spoken charm, like an incantation, but not entirely that. A mental exercise, a thought that took command of the body—that must be nearer to the truth.

For it worked.

The creature vanished. Vanished and was gone—gone out of the world.

There was no sign of it, no single vibration of its being. As if it had never been.

And the thing it had said, the thing that it had thought? It went like this. Like this—

Jenkins jerked himself up short. It was printed on his brain and he knew it, knew the word and thought and the right inflection—but he must not use it, he must forget about it, he must keep it hidden.

For it had worked on the cobbly. And it would work on him. He knew that it would work.

The man had swung around and now he stood limp, hands dangling at his side, staring at Jenkins.

His lips moved in the white blur of his face. "You … you—"

"I am Jenkins," Jenkins told him. "This is my new body."

"There was something here," said Peter.

"It was a cobbly," said Jenkins. "Joshua told me one had gotten through."

"It killed Lupus," said Peter.

Jenkins nodded. "Yes, it killed Lupus. And it killed many others. It was the thing that has been killing."

"And I killed it," said Peter. "I killed it or drove it away … or something."

"You frightened it away," said Jenkins. "You were stronger than it was. It was afraid of you. You frightened it back to the world it came from."

"I could have killed it," Peter boasted, "but the cord broke—"

"Next time," said Jenkins, quietly, "you must make stronger cords. I will show you how it's done. And a steel tip for your arrow—"

"For my what?"

"For your arrow. The throwing stick is an arrow. The stick and cord you throw it with is called a bow. All together, it's called a bow and arrow."

Peter's shoulders sagged. "It was done before, then. I was not the first?"

Jenkins shook his head. "No, you were not the first."

Jenkins walked across the grass and laid his hand upon Peter's shoulder.

"Come home with me, Peter."

Peter shook his head. "No. I'll sit here with Lupus until the morning comes. And then I'll call in his friends and we will bury him."

He lifted his head to look into Jenkins' face. "Lupus was a friend of mine. A great friend, Jenkins."

"I know he must have been," said Jenkins. "But I'll be seeing you?"

"Oh, yes," said Peter. "I'm coming to the picnic. The webster picnic. It's in a week or so."

"So it is," said Jenkins, speaking very slowly, thinking as he spoke. "So it is. And I will see you then."

He turned around and walked slowly up the hill.

Peter sat down beside the dead wolf, waiting for the dawn. Once or twice, he lifted his hand to brush at his cheeks.

They sat in a semicircle facing Jenkins and listened to him closely.

"Now, you must pay attention," Jenkins said, "That is most important. You must pay attention and you must think real hard and you must hang very tightly to the things you have—to the lunch baskets and the bows and arrows and the other things."

One of the girls giggled. "Is this a new game, Jenkins?"

"Yes," said Jenkins, "sort of. I guess that is what it is—a new game. And an exciting one. A most exciting one."

Someone said: "Jenkins always thinks up a new game for the webster picnic."

"And now," said Jenkins, "you must pay attention. You must look at me and try to figure out the thing I'm thinking—"

"It's a guessing game," shrieked the giggling girl. "I love guessing games."

Jenkins made his mouth into a smile. "You're right," he said. "That's exactly what it is—a guessing game. And now if you will pay attention and look at me—"

"I want to try out these bows and arrows," said one of the men. "After this is over, we can try them out, can't we, Jenkins?"

"Yes," said Jenkins patiently, "after this is over you can try them out."

He closed his eyes and made his brain reach out for each of them, ticking them off individually, sensing the thrilled expectancy of the minds that yearned towards his, felt the little probing fingers of thought that were dabbing at his brain.

"Harder," Jenkins thought. "Harder! Harder!"

A quiver went across his mind and he brushed it away. Not hypnotism—nor yet telepathy, but the best that he could do. A drawing together, a huddling together of minds—and it was all a

game.

Slowly, carefully, he brought out the hidden symbol—the words, the thought and the inflection. Easily he slid them into his brain, one by one, like one would speak to a child, trying to teach it the exact tone, the way to hold its lips, the way to move its tongue.

He let them lay there for a moment, felt the other minds touching them, felt the fingers dabbing at them. And then he thought them aloud—thought them as the cobbly had thought them.

And nothing happened. Absolutely nothing. No click within his brain. No feeling of falling. No vertigo. No sensation at all.

So he had failed. So it was over. So the game was done.

He opened his eyes and the hillside was the same. The sun still shone and the sky was robin's egg.

He sat stiffly, silently and felt them looking at him.

Everything was the same as it had been before.

Except—There was a daisy where the clump of Oswego tea had bloomed redly before. There was a pasture rose beside him and there had been none when he had closed his eyes.

"Is that all there's to it?" asked the giggly girl, plainly disappointed.

"That is all," said Jenkins.

"Now we can try out the bows and arrows?" asked one of the youths.

"Yes," said Jenkins, "but be careful. Don't point them at one another. They are dangerous. Peter will show you how."

"We'll unpack the lunch," said one of the women. "Did you bring a basket, Jenkins?"

"Yes," said Jenkins. "Esther has it. She held it when we played the game."

"That's nice," said the woman. "You surprise us every year with the things you bring."

And you'll be surprised this year, Jenkins told himself. You'll be surprised at packages of seeds, all very neatly labeled.

For we'll need seeds, he thought to himself. Seeds to plant new gardens and to start new fields—to raise food once again. And we'll need bows and arrows to bring in some meat. And spears and hooks for fish.

Now other little things that were different began to show themselves. The way a tree leaned at the edge of the meadow. And a new kink in the river far below.

Jenkins sat quietly in the sun, listening to the shouts of the men and boys, trying out the bows and arrows, hearing the chatter of the women as they spread the cloth and unpacked the lunches.

I'll have to tell them soon, he told himself. I'll have to warn them

to go easy on the food—not to gobble it up all at one sitting. For we will need that food to tide us over the first day or two, until we can find roots to dig and fish to catch and fruit to pick.

Yes, pretty soon I'll have to call them in and break the news to them. Tell them they're on their own. Tell them why. Tell them to go ahead and do anything they want to. For this is a brand-new world.

Warn them about the cobblies.

Although that's the least important. Man has a way with him—a very vicious way. A way of dealing with anything that stands in his path.

Jenkins sighed.

Lord help the cobblies, he said.

The Hangnoose Army Rides to Town!

As was often the case with Cliff Simak's Westerns, his journals do not show that he ever wrote a story with the name under which this one was published; so I'll admit I'm guessing when I note that his journals do show that he was paid $175 in 1945 for a story with the title "Hang Your Guns on a Gallows Tree"—the only other evidence to support this guess is the fact that the sheriff who is the hero of this story was planning to leave the business of law enforcement—that is, to hang up his guns.

The sheriff just referred to is named Parker, which happened to have been the maiden name of Cliff's beloved grandmother, but the best thing about this story is the fact that Cliff was able to indulge in a few bits of rather poetic language that clearly show the author's familiarity with, and love for, the countryside.

This story originally appeared as the first story in the September 1945 issue of Ace-High Western Stories.

—dww

CHAPTER ONE
Delayed Payment

Sheriff Clint Parker reined his buckskin gelding to a halt on the ridge above the little coulee that sheltered the Atkins ranch buildings. He stared at them, remembering every nook and cranny.

They were small and weather-beaten, with a look of poverty about them. There was the barn where he and Luke had played as youngsters, the creek in which they had gone fishing and the fence, that old Matt had sworn he'd fix, but was still sagging with a tired and drunken look.

An old ranch dog spotted the intruders, and limped down off the porch. He stood at the gate barking furiously.

Frank Betz, foreman of the Turkey Track, growled at Parker, "What you stopping for—losing your nerve?"

Parker snapped at him angrily. "Those people are folks to me, Betz. Old Matt Atkins and his wife took me in when the cholera killed my real folks. They treated me like a son and Luke was like a brother to me."

"So now you're going soft," sneered Betz.

Parker's hand slid to his holster. "Betz," he said softly, "I don't think Luke Atkins killed your boss, but the evidence says he did and I'll arrest him on that. Got any more to say?"

Betz, red-faced and squat, hunched forward in the saddle. "Not another word," he said. "That's good enough for me."

Parker touched the buckskin with a spur and they cantered down the hillside. The old ranch dog came out at a rheumatic lope to meet them, bawling as he came. The bawling changed to welcome when he sighted Parker and he galloped toward the house, tail wagging them forward.

Old Matt Atkins, stubby pipe sticking from his graying whiskers, struggled from the rocking chair on the sagging porch.

"Howdy, son," he hailed and then stopped in mid-speech, eyes widening at the sight of Betz.

"Hello, Matt," said Parker. "Luke around?"

"Guess he is somewhere. I'll go in and tell Ma you're here. She's taking her nap."

Parker raised his hand to stop him. "Not right yet," he said. "How is she?"

The old man puffed stubbornly at the pipe, smoke drooling from his whiskers.

"Right poorly," he told Parker. "Neither of us young as we used to

be. She misses you, Clint. Don't stop by as often as you used to."

"I'm busy," Parker replied, but even as he said it, he knew how lame an excuse it was. Not the way to act with folks who took you in when you were an orphan and treated you like you were their own.

The front door opened and Luke came onto the porch.

"Thought I heard you out here," he said. "Looking for me, Clint?"

Parker nodded, moistened his lips with his tongue.

They know there's something wrong, he told himself. Just Betz being along would tell them there was something wrong. They knew he wouldn't ride with scum like Betz.

"What's the matter, Clint?" asked Luke.

"Nothing much," said Betz, speaking for the first time. "Just a little killing!"

Old Matt's hands went out and clutched the railing of the porch. "What's that damn land-grabber doing along with you, son?" he demanded. "Him and his yarn of killing?"

"He's right, Matt," Parker said. "There has been a killing. Byron Campbell was bushwhacked in Calf Canyon."

"Hell," Old Matt spat across the railing, "is that all. The man that done it ought to get a bounty."

"They think Luke done it," Parker told him quietly. "They found a .45-70 cartridge not thirty feet away from the body."

Old Matt straightened, hobbled forward. "You're joking, Clint," he said. "Too early in the day for that kind of—"

"Killing," snarled Betz, "is a damn poor kind of joke."

Luke shook his head, befuddled. "If you found a .45-70," he said, "it must be from that old gun of ours. Only one like it in the country. But there must be some mistake. I ain't been off the place all day."

"Luke ain't had that gun down for a week," Old Matt yelled at them. "Last time he shot it was a week ago last Sunday when he went out to get a wolf that had been hanging 'round."

"Ah, hell," snarled Betz, "let's cut out the jawing. Luke's the one that did it, all right."

Parker swung on Betz angrily. "Damn it, keep your mouth shut!"

He turned to Luke. "We can't try it here. Afraid you'll have to ride to town with us."

"You mean you are arresting me?"

Parker nodded. "I guess that's what it amounts to."

"So you've turned against us!" Old Matt bellowed. "Against the ones that raised you. The ones that's always been your friends. You've tied up with the dirty, thieving land-stealers. Since you took to running around with Horton's daughter, you—"

Luke's hand reached out and grasped his father's shoulder, swung him around.

"You keep out of this, Pa," he said. "This is between Clint and me. I'll go with him, but I'll be right back and I'll bring Clint home to supper with me."

"That's what you think," growled Betz.

Parker was lighting the lamp against the first dusk of evening when Ann Horton stepped into his office.

She looked very slender in her checkered shirt and Levi overalls. He thought he detected a frown of worry on her pretty, freckled face.

"Good evening, Ann," he said, soberly, suddenly glad that she was there, glad that here was someone he could talk to.

He placed the chimney on the lamp, tossed the burned-out match into the coffee-can ash tray.

She came to the desk swiftly.

"That was an awful thing to have to do, Clint," she said.

He nodded. "Guess it was something I asked for when I took up this job of sheriffing."

"But Luke!" she protested. "Luke is your best friend, why he's almost like your brother."

"That's right," Parker agreed. "The Atkins never treated me like an orphan. Whenever Luke had a pair of new overalls, I had a new pair, too. And old Matt gave Luke more lickings, seems like, than he gave me, although usually I was the one that got the two of us in trouble."

He stared at the lamp, remembering. "We did all the fool things that boys will do," he said. "We even had a secret cave where we dug for treasure and played at hiding from Indians, never telling a soul about it."

"I know," Ann told him, softly. "You showed me where the cave was. Remember?"

He shot a quick glance at her and saw the brightness of her eyes, as if tears were just behind them. One of his hands reached out and closed on hers atop the desk.

"Yes, I recall it, Ann. You're the only one, but Luke and me, that knows about it to this very day."

The girl's voice was almost a whisper. "What are you going to do about it, Clint?"

Parker's face hardened in the lamplight. "Luke didn't do it," he said. "I'm sure he didn't. And yet they found that cartridge there behind the tree and the only gun that shoots that sort of cartridge is the one old Matt brought to this country with him. I remember it from the time I was a kid. It always hung in the sitting room and once in a while old Matt would take it down and let Luke and me sight along the barrel. But he never let us use it, not then, because he said it was a man's gun. Even now, Luke doesn't use it often, only when he figures

on some long distance shooting."

"But Campbell was shot close, from ambush."

"I know," said Parker. "And that's what I can't understand. The bullet went in the chest and never came out. Almost as if the shot had come from far away and the bullet was kind of petered out before it hit him. But the cartridge was behind the tree, not more than thirty feet away."

He stopped as he heard the sound of footsteps, but they continued past the door.

"Can't say I'd of blamed Luke much if he had shot him," he went on. "Campbell had been crowding him considerable. Shoving stock over into Luke's meadow and down onto the creek. Kept Luke busy shoving the critters back."

"I don't suppose that now you'll think any more about that job up north?"

He shook his head. "I can't. Not with this coming up. I got to keep on being sheriff, as long as I'm needed. There are so many folks depending on me. There's Luke and George Lane and Jack Kennedy …"

His voice ran thin and stopped, embarrassed.

"You mean," Ann told him levelly, "you got to back the little ranchers against the folks like us."

"If all the big fellows were like your dad," said Parker, "I wouldn't have to worry. Your dad gets along tolerable well with all his neighbors, just little ruckuses now and then, but nothing serious. It's the land and water hogs like Campbell and Hart out at the Hashknife and Danielson's Bar C that cause all the real trouble. If I stepped out of office and let them elect Gibbs, the little fellows wouldn't have a sheepherder's chance. They'd be wiped out before the year was over."

"And yet," said Ann, "your little ranchers hate my father just like they do Hart and Danielson."

"That's only because he's one of the big owners, Ann. They don't quite trust him yet."

"So you're going to run for another term?"

Parker nodded. "Looks like I have to. That job up north was tempting because, as your dad told me, there's very little future in this sheriffing."

"Maybe they'll all get together and give you a gold watch with a nice inscription on it when you're through," Ann told him, bitterly. "Or they'll all turn out to your funeral and give you a big sendoff."

Parker said softly, "You want me to take that job awful much, don't you, Ann?"

Her eyes were bright again and she drew her hand away. "It's for you to decide, Clint," she said.

He followed her to the door and she paused for a moment looking at him intently.

"Who found that cartridge?" she asked. "The one that killed Campbell."

"Why, it was Kennedy. Betz and Egan went out to look for Campbell when he didn't show up and they stopped at Kennedy's place and took him along. Betz found the body and they looked around for sign. It was Kennedy who found it."

"And Kennedy's one of your little ranchers."

Parker nodded glumly.

Her voice sank to a whisper. "Dad says he wouldn't blame you if there was a jailbreak. Says he don't think anyone else would, either."

Parker shook his head. "Couldn't do that, Ann. That would put the owlhoot mark on Luke and I'm sure he didn't do it. He'll just have to take his chances with the jury."

He watched her cross the sidewalk and swing into the saddle.

He raised a hand to her and she waved back, then galloped down the street.

Back in the office, Clint sat down at the desk, rolled a cigarette and blew smoke at the lamp, watching it coil above the chimney.

It would be nice to take the job Ann had spoken of. Paid a good deal more than sheriffing and had a future to it. Would mean that he and Ann could get married right off. Old Hank Horton, last time he had seen him, had been downright insistent that he take it, but Parker remembered that he had put the old man off with a feeling that the job may have been engineered as a means of getting him out of office. Getting him out and getting Gibbs in.

There was no one but himself, he knew, that the small ranchers could put up who would have a chance at the polls. And that meant the Hashknife and Bar C and Turkey Track, maybe even Horton's Bent Arrow would start crowding, pushing in their cattle on land that wasn't theirs, building up to a gunfight or an ambush or just a few hot words that would be an excuse for range war to flare across the land.

And once that happened, the little men were finished. The Atkins ranch, the Kennedy outfit, George Lane, old Jim O'Neill and all the rest of them would be snowed under the thunder of hoofs, the bark of guns, the smoke of flaming buildings.

As long as Clint Parker was sheriff they wouldn't try it, but the minute he was out….

Feet crunched outside the door and Parker looked up. His deputy, Bob Sawyer, was coming into the room, a plate piled high with food in each hand.

"I'm mighty hungry," Parker told him. "What you got? Better be good, took you plenty long to bring it."

Sawyer belched good naturedly, set the plates down on the desk.

"Chicken," he said. "Stopped to get a drink."

Parker reached for one of the plates. "I'll take Luke's in to him."

Sawyer sat down in a chair, tilted it against the wall, started to roll a smoke.

In the cell block back of the office, Parker unlocked a cell and walked inside.

"Something to eat, Luke," he said.

Luke stirred in the darkness. "Plumb forgot to light the lamp you left me," he said. "Just sitting here pondering."

A match snarled across the seat of his trousers and flared into flame. Luke bent and removed the lamp's chimney, touched the match to the wick, replaced the chimney. Parker put the plate on the table.

"You get someone to go out and take care of the place?" asked Luke.

"I'll get someone in the morning," Parker said. "Ernie Jackson may be the best I can do, but he can do the chores."

Luke reached out for the plate, dragged it in front of him.

"Hope it won't be for long," he said. "I ain't got too much money to be paying hired hands."

"Don't worry about that, Luke," said Parker. "I'll take care of it. Figure I sort of owe you something for hauling you in here. Safest place in the world for you right now. If you wasn't here, the Turkey Track would be out gunning for you."

"I can take care of myself," Luke told him, suddenly sullen.

"I'll see the county attorney in the morning," Parker said, "and get him to set an early hearing. Maybe the judge will make your bail reasonable …"

Luke snorted. "Fat chance," he said. "Both of them polecats are owned by Turkey Track."

Parker tried to soothe him. "We'll see what we can do. If you want anything, extra blanket or something, just sing out. I'll be in the next room."

Luke swallowed a piece of chicken, stared up at Parker.

"Honest, Clint," he said, "you don't think I done it."

"You know damn well I don't."

"Sure thought about it plenty often," Luke admitted. "Figured that if I ever had the chance maybe I would. But I never went hunting for that chance."

"If you had," said Parker, "you'd shot him face to face. You'd never hid to do it."

Luke went back to his chicken and Parker fidgeted for a moment, embarrassed, then turned to leave.

"Remember," he admonished. "Sing out if there's anything you

want."

He closed the door, heard the lock snap into place and went back to the office.

Sawyer was tilted in a chair against the wall, smoking, staring at the ceiling.

"Any news in town?" he asked the deputy.

"Not much," Sawyer told him. "Everybody stirred up about this shooting. Folks talking some about passing the hat for Luke. Kennedy feels right bad about finding that cartridge. Seems to think it's his fault Luke was dragged into it. Says Luke was his friend and neighbor and if he'd never found the cartridge or if he'd had brains enough to keep still about it once he did find it, Luke wouldn't be in a tight."

"Kennedy in town?"

"Over at the Silver Dollar. Getting all oiled up."

Parker considered. "Maybe I ought to go over and sort of steer him home."

"Ah, hell," said Sawyer, disgusted. "He's a grown man. He can take care of himself. Another hour and they'll roll him out in the alley to sleep it off."

He thumped forward in the chair, pitched the cigarette butt into the cuspidor.

"How about a game of checkers?" he inquired.

"O.K.," agreed Parker. "You get the board set …"

He paused, stiffening at the sound that came from the street—the muffled, slow sound of many horses' feet pounding through the dust.

Sawyer was listening, too, head canted to one side.

"Powerful lot of folks must have decided to ride into town," he said.

The hoofs came on. No other sound. No voices. No shouts. Just the steady sound of plopping hoofs.

Parker strode toward the door, stepped out on the sidewalk.

Coming down the street were the horses, moving at a slow walk, bunched together and the men who rode them were sedate and solemn, with rifles balanced on their thighs.

Business-like, the cavalcade swung around and bunched in front of the jail, the men sitting their horses silently, staring at Parker.

Parker's eyes switched from face to face and a cold ball grew and turned to ice in his stomach's pit. Red-faced Betz and black-bearded Egan and behind them Fred Taylor and Del Vickers, Pete Wheeler and Spike Hubbard. There were others, too—all men from the Turkey Track.

Parker hitched up his gun-belt, moved one step to the side to get out of the light that streamed from the door.

Betz broke the silence. "We've come for Luke," he said.

CHAPTER TWO
Hemp For Your Prisoner

The men still sat their horses, watchful, waiting, eyes and faces grim.

Sawyer called from the door. “We better let them have him, sheriff. We can’t buck—”

The look that Parker gave him silenced him as effectively as a slap across the mouth.

“Betz,” said Parker, speaking to the red-faced man, “as long as I’m sheriff of this county, Luke gets a trial, fair and square—and there won’t be no necktie party!”

The mob sat silently, unmoving, waiting for whatever would happen.

Betz stirred in his saddle, as if getting ready to dismount.

“Sheriff,” he declared, “we’d hate like hell to hurt you, but we’re coming in.”

Parker slid his hands to the butts of his guns, half lifted them from leather.

“You fellows are my friends,” he said quietly. “I’ve known you for years …”

A jeering voice interrupted. “We don’t want no speech, sheriff. All we want is Luke.”

“… but the first man that moves,” said Parker, “gets a bellyful of bullets.”

Hair trigger tension crackled in the air. One stir, one move, a single word, the flicker of an eyelash, Parker knew, would turn hell wide open in the street of Cedar City.

Betz was the man to watch. He was the one who would decide. Even now, behind the red face that glared at the sheriff, the cunning little brain was working, weighing chances …

Out of the corner of his eye, Parker caught a sense of motion, for a second he tore his gaze from the men before him.

Jack Kennedy had come out of the Silver Dollar, was standing unsteadily on the sidewalk, one hand groping for a non-existent post.

Parker’s eyes came back to the men bunched in the street before the jail, fists tightening on his sixguns’ grips.

A sudden note of warning rang inside his head and he moved swiftly, spinning on his heels, stopped in astonishment.

Kennedy was striding drunkenly up the street, sixgun in each hand and his face was twisted into a terrible scowl of hate.

“No,” Parker yelled at him. “Kennedy, you are crazy …”

But it was too late. The gun in Kennedy's right hand came up and blasted, spitting flame and smoke. And then the gun in his left hand—and then the right again. Staggering, but plodding forward, Kennedy kept coming, first one gun, then another, firing point blank into a target where there was no chance of missing.

Pandemonium exploded in the street before the impact of the bullets. Frightened horses reared, fighting the bits, kicking up clouds of dust. One man screamed and another slumped from the saddle without screaming. A horse broke loose and rushed past Kennedy, his rider swaying in the saddle, fighting to keep his seat. Sixguns spat with vicious hate and one man cursed, a steady, terrible cursing that rose above the crack of guns, the shouts and screams, the sounds that frightened, fighting horses made.

The first bullet struck Kennedy and he stumbled, but his guns kept coming up. Then another bullet struck him and spun him half around and another smashed him to his knees. He fought to rise, mouth working into a mask of hate, but the bullets had their way, smashing into him, beating him down into the dust, tearing him to ribbons.

The guns were silent now, but the street was cloudy with kicked-up dust and the blue drift of powder smoke.

Betz spurred his frightened horse toward Parker, gun half lifted. Parker's guns came out of the holsters, tipped up toward the Turkey Track foreman. Betz let his gun arm droop.

"Damn you," he roared. "You had him planted on us. You had it all worked out."

"Pick up your dead ones and get out of town," snapped Parker. "And do it fast."

For a moment Betz sat staring at him, slack mouth drooping.

"Leave the ones that aren't dead," said Parker, "and we'll have Doc patch them up."

Feet were pounding on the sidewalk and people were shouting.

"Get out," Parker shouted, "before the whole town's down here gunning for you."

Betz swung his horse around, shouted to his men.

"Get moving, boys! Get moving fast!"

Feet thundered toward Parker and he swung around. Newman, the blacksmith, was pelting down the street, sawed-off shotgun tucked beneath his arm.

"Need some help, sheriff?" he bellowed, but Parker shook his head.

"The boys," he told him, "are already leaving."

Bunched together, the Turkey Track mob was getting out of town, horses at the gallop. In the street lay five motionless forms, huddled

close together, and a little ways beyond lay another.

Slowly, Parker walked out into the street toward the body that was apart, stood for a moment looking down on the bullet-mangled man.

Sawyer spoke softly at his elbow, “Who in hell would ever thought that he had it in him.”

Parker said, “If he figured that he owed Luke anything, he sure has paid it now.”

Slowly he turned away. “Bob,” he said, “you take over here. Clear this mess up.”

A crowd was gathering and Parker pushed his way through it, went into the office.

Luke’s cell was dark and Parker called out softly.

Luke’s voice came out of the darkness: “What was it, Clint? Rope party?”

“That’s what it was, Luke. Betz and some of the boys from the Turkey Track. But it’s all right, now.”

“Got something to tell you,” said Luke. “But I don’t want to shout. Can’t you come in?”

Parker found the key, fumbled with it, hands shaking, finally got the door open.

“You’re running a lot of risk keeping me here,” said Luke. “Betz will try …”

Parker sensed the quick movement in the dark, started to duck, but he was too late. His head leaped to a sudden explosion of stars that burst within his brain and he groped endlessly through a darkness that poured in and overwhelmed him and pressed him down.

Slowly knowledge crept back and he grew aware of the dull ache that hammered in his head, remembered the blow that had sent him spinning into unconsciousness.

His groping hand found his hat where it had tumbled on the floor and put it on his head. Slowly, foggily, he gathered his legs beneath him and wobbled to his feet, clutching at the bars to keep his balance.

For a long moment, he stood there, mind groping back, piecing together the little bits of knowledge that surged to the surface of his brain.

Luke had tricked him into opening the door and then had slugged him, presumably to make his getaway.

Did this mean that Luke was guilty? Or did it simply mean that Luke would no longer place Parker, his friend, in the dangerous position of being his jailer? He was all confused.

Low voices came from the office and Parker felt his way along the bars to the cell door, stood there groggily, listening to the buzz of words that grew into sentences and had meaning.

Sawyer was saying, "… not a thing. He don't suspect a thing. He feels Luke didn't do the killing, but he's not sure."

Another voice said, "We got to sell him on the idea. Whether Luke did it or not, we got to make him think he did. This is the luckiest break we've gotten thus far."

Gibbs' voice—Gibbs in there talking to Sawyer. Gibbs, the man the big outfits wanted to be sheriff, talking with his deputy.

Parker's hands became fists at his side as he stood stiffly, listening.

"I'll do my best," Sawyer said.

"He won't help Luke make a break?"

"Nope, he's too square a shooter for that. If it was his own brother, and Luke is damn near that, he'd hang him if he thought that he was guilty."

Gibbs' voice was wishful thinking: "Kind of nice if Luke would escape. Sheriff that can't keep a prisoner, once he's got him, don't amount to shucks. And if a posse should have to go out and bring Luke back dead it wouldn't help him to speak of, neither."

The voices were fading and Parker knew that they were moving to the door.

Fists bunched at his side, he slid out of the cell door into the corridor, took a step toward the office, then stopped.

My own deputy, he thought. *My own deputy against me.* Working for Gibbs, bought off by the big outfits. Plotting against me in my own office. Sawyer thinks I'm down at the hotel or he'd never let Gibbs in.

He slid along the wall of cell blocks, moving swiftly past the door into the office, catching sight of Sawyer standing in the door talking to the man outside.

He let himself out the back door, closed it behind him. He stood leaning for a moment against it, staring up at the stars that blazed in the sky above, drawing in deep breaths of the fresh air. His head still ached, but he wasn't dizzy any longer and his legs were sure and swift beneath him. He checked his guns. Both of them were in the belt and had not been tampered with.

The town was quiet again. Apparently Luke had made his getaway without any trouble, without being seen and, suddenly, Parker was glad of that.

In the stable back of the jail the buckskin gelding was chewing a mouthful of hay and stamping his feet. As Parker opened the door the smell of hay and leather, the cozy warmth of the place rushed out at him.

"Whoa, boy," he said, and stepped swiftly inside, pulling the door behind him. He found the saddle in the dark and cinched it on.

The single light in the kitchen of the Atkins ranch house was a

friendly beacon in the night and Parker, heading for it, recognized the softness of the moonlight and the contour of the country, the smell of sagebrush and the squat blackness of the buildings crouching in the coulee as old, familiar things. Things that had a special meaning here as nowhere else.

The old dog exploded from beneath the porch and rushed to him, across the yard, baying like an angry lion.

"Hi-yah, Shep," said Parker and the baying changed to friendly barking as the dog bounced up and down like a rocking horse.

The door swung open with the faint gleam of light from the kitchen seeping along the hall and in it stood the bulky figure of old Matt, a heavy cartridge belt around his bulging middle.

"Who in hell is there?" he thundered.

"It's Clint," said Parker. "You can put up your shooting iron."

Parker swung off the buckskin, strode up the porch steps.

"Luke with you?" asked the old man.

Parker shook his head. "Luke broke out. Hit me over the head and got plumb and slick away."

"And you're hunting for him. Figure he came here."

"Not hunting him, exactly. Think I can put my hands on Luke anytime I want to. Just came to tell you folks."

Parker moved past the old man and into the hall. Matt closed the door behind him, shuffled back toward the kitchen, Parker following.

A woman's voice, quavery, came out of the darkness.

"Who is it, Pa?"

"It's Clint," the old man told her. "Come to tell us that Luke broke out of jail. Danged scamp. Never could keep him locked up. Used to lock him in a closet when he was up to devilment and he always managed to get out somehow."

"Drag up a chair and rest your guns," Matt told Parker. "I'll stir up the fire and we'll have a cup of coffee."

Parker pulled a chair back from the table, dropped his hat on the floor and sat down heavily. Looking through the door into the sitting room, he could see the glint of the light on the old .45-70 hanging on the wall, hanging where it had hung as long as he could remember.

"Wouldn't happen," asked old Matt, "that you kind of helped Luke get away? Like I figure maybe you must of helped him out of that closet off and on."

"No, I wouldn't do a thing like that to Luke. That would brand him as the man who did it. It would turn him outlaw."

"Maybe he figures that he can track down the killer."

"Maybe," said Parker.

Slippers padded softly out of the darkness and a woman stood in the doorway of the kitchen.

Parker rose from the chair. “Hello, Mother,” he said.

Tall and thin, white hair smoothed back tightly against her head, she stood stiffly in the doorway, one hand clutching at the jamb.

“You know Luke never done it, Clint,” she said.

Parker shook his head. “Of course he didn’t. I had to take him in because the evidence was against him and because it wasn’t safe to let him stay here. Betz would have had his men around this place like coyotes around a dying steer.”

She walked towards him and smiled wanly.

“You were both good boys,” she said. “Remember how every Sunday we had our Bible lessons out in the living room.”

Parker reached out and hugged her close.

“And now,” she sobbed. “And now…”

Old Matt stood staring at them, eyes blinking rapidly, beard trembling just a little, coffee pot in one hand, stove poker in the other.

“Now, Ma,” he said. “Clint ain’t chasing Luke. He just come to tell us.”

The old clock on the wall ticked heavily, marking off the seconds with a solemn face. A vagrant gust of wind moaned in the chimney corner.

“You’re staying the night with us, ain’t you, Clint?” asked Matt.

Parker nodded. “Might as well,” he said.

Mother Atkins drew away from Parker, dabbing at her eyes, reached for the coffee pot.

“Standing around,” she snapped. “Standing around all the blessed time. Here, get out of my way. Can’t you see the boy is starved.”

In Luke’s attic room, Parker undressed slowly, sitting on the edge of the bed to pull off his boots, remembering the time when he and Luke had shared this very room. An orphan lad, taken in by neighbors who never let him feel that he was an orphan. Licked by old Matt as his dead father would have licked him when he did wrong, cried over and babied by the woman he had learned to call Mother, sitting solemn-eyed and very straight with Luke every Sunday morning for the Bible lesson.

He hung his gunbelt on the bedpost, slipped out of shirt and trousers, blew out the light and slid into bed, felt the old familiar mattress yielding to his body.

The wind marched across the roof, rattling a shingle here and there, came back to rattle them again. A low hanging tree branch scraped against the side of the house and downstairs he heard the mumble of voices as the old folks talked themselves to sleep.

Shut your eyes, he told himself, and pretend that it is ten years ago. Pretend that Luke is lying here beside you and that tomorrow the two of you are going fishing down in the big sucker hole just above

the drift fence. Shep is a young dog and Mother has fewer wrinkles in her face than she had tonight. Old Matt's beard is just starting to turn gray and maybe, in the morning he will take down the gun and let you sight along its barrel and brag about all the game that you could get if he'd only let you use it.

But it would be no use, he knew. No use to try to purchase even a moment's forgetfulness. For Luke was not in this bed, but somewhere out in the night, a hunted man, hunted for a thing that he never could have done. And Shep was old and had rheumatism so bad that of winter nights he was allowed to come in and sleep beside the kitchen stove. And Matt never could look at that gun again without remembering.

Parker lay, staring into the darkness, listening to the wind walking on the roof and tripping on the shingles.

Suddenly he sat straight up in bed, jerked upright by something that had come out of the night. Rubbing his eyes, he waited for it to come again.

"Must have been asleep," he told himself, surprised.

Thunderous knocking rumbled through the house, the insistent beat of fists hammering on a door.

Throwing back the covers, Parker swung his feet out of bed, hand reaching in the darkness for the gunbelt on the bedpost.

The knocking came again, a hollow rolling sound.

Feet shuffled through the darkness below and Matt's querulous voice came floating up the stairs.

"I'm coming, dog gone it. I'm coming. Just hold your horses."

Parker felt the cold of the floor biting into his bare feet as he stalked softly, gun in hand, to the top of the stairs. The knocking had stopped, but outside old Shep was barking viciously.

CHAPTER THREE
Bushwhack Boomerang

A lamp chimney rattled in the living room and the flare of a match splashed across the darkness.

Gun gripped tightly, Parker squatted on the top stair step, shivering in his underwear, eyes watching the front door.

Slippers slapped across the floor and he saw old Matt, nightshirt flapping at his ankles, shuffle across to the door. In one hand he carried the monstrous sixgun that he had worn earlier in the evening when Parker had ridden up.

The latch clicked and the door creaked open and in it loomed a red-faced man. Behind him, on the porch, were other dark shapes.

"Where's Luke?" snarled Betz.

Matt stood still, gun hanging at his side, half hidden by his nightshirt.

"Luke's in jail," he said. "You should know about it, Betz. You helped put him there."

"Luke broke out," Betz told him. "We figured that we'd find him here."

"Ain't seen him," Matt said softly.

"Him and that chicken-livered sheriff both are missing," Betz bellowed. "More than likely went off together. When we find them we aim to hang them on the same tree."

Old Matt stood unmoving.

"Get out of my way," snarled Betz. "We're coming in to search."

The old man did not move and Betz stood undecided.

Slowly, deliberately, Parker brought his gun up, lined the sights with cold accuracy on the point straight between Betz' eyes.

"You're not coming in," said Matt. "You aren't even staying."

His hand moved swiftly, the huge sixgun glinting in the lamplight. From where he squatted, Parker heard the grunt of surprise that was driven from Betz' lungs as the gun's muzzle jammed into his belly.

Slowly Betz took a backward step.

"I'll be back," he snarled. "I'll make you sorry that—"

"Get a move on," croaked old Matt. "Get out of here before I dust you off!"

Betz backed away and the dark shapes backed with him, across the porch and down the steps, watching the steady menace of the gun held in the old man's hand.

Parker released his pressure on the trigger, let the hammer fall

back gently.

Hoofs pounded outside, drummed into the distance.

Old Matt closed the door and swung around and in the lamplight his face was drawn and haggard.

Parker called softly: "Matt."

The old man moved to the bottom of the stairs, stood looking up.

"Clint," he said, "you were backing me!"

"Betz," Parker told him, "never came closer to dying in all his crooked life."

He rose and came down the stairs.

"Matt," he said, "I been thinking. I have to go find Luke."

"You know where to find him, son?"

"I think I do."

The old man's eyes crinkled for a moment in the lamplight.

"Clint, I lied to you tonight. Luke was here, just before you came."

Parker nodded. "I figured that he was."

"Seems to me you got yourself in a tight as well as Luke."

"It wouldn't have made no difference," Parker told him. "If it hadn't been Luke, they'd figured out some other way. They are out to get me, one way or another. They aim to either kill me or discredit me as sheriff. They want to get their own man in!"

"But the girl," protested Matt. "How about the girl—old man Horton's daughter."

Parker shook his head. "She's pretty much disgusted with me. Don't figure she'll have much to do with me from now on. Her and her dad wanted me to take a job up north…"

"I said some harsh things to you this afternoon," Matt told him. "You know, Clint, that I didn't mean them."

For a moment they stood facing one another.

"Sure," said Parker. "Sure, I know you didn't mean them."

A voice called from the bedroom.

"That's Ma," said Matt. "You hustle upstairs and get into your clothes. I'll rustle up some coffee."

Outside the moon was low and the morning crisp. The stars in the east were paling and the first sleepy chirps of birds came from the grove down by the spring.

Just beyond the porch, Parker stood for a moment, listening, but there was no sound but the birds and the wind rustling in the trees.

A western window in the barn let in a slash of moonlight across the stall where the buckskin stood, slack-hipped, head hanging in the manger, asleep or dozing. He lifted his head at Parker's step and the man spoke to him softly, strode to the peg where the saddle hung. Swiftly he lifted it off, half turned—and heard the sound.

The sound of a foot scuffing through the bedding, the sharp indrawn whistle of a human breath.

"Stand right where you are," a voice said. "And keep your hand from your gun."

Slowly, carefully, still holding the saddle in front of him, Parker pivoted, saw the man standing just at the edge of the shaft of moonlight—huge and burly and black-bearded.

The moonlight highlighted the gun held in the hairy fist and the man's teeth gleamed through the tangle of his beard.

"Hello, Egan," said Parker. "So you stayed behind."

"Told Betz you would either be here or be coming here, but he didn't figure that you would. Said both you and Luke had too much brains for that."

"And you figured that we didn't."

Egan grunted in disgust and as he grunted, Parker moved … one quick step forward, arms straightening, heaving the saddle with all the power of his twisting body.

The gun in Egan's fist barked, splashing fire, and Parker heard the muffled chug of the bullet smashing into the leather of the saddle.

Parker leaped, hand slashing at the waving gun wrist as the saddle crunched into Egan's body, felt the impact of his fist crack against the arm and send the sixgun flying.

And even as his left fist struck the wrist, his right was coming back, gathering power for the blow that whistled forward, straight and clean. The fist spattered with a crunching sound and Egan staggered, blood spurting on his beard.

The bearded man was slowly rising. Parker stepped forward. Deliberately, mercilessly, he swung his fist, smashed Egan down again.

Bewildered, eyes half glazed, Egan struggled to his feet, lurched one uncertain step. Bending forward, almost as if fighting for his balance, he stared at the man before him.

"I'll kill…" he mumbled and tried to rush. Parker stepped aside and Egan, legs folding beneath him, tumbled to the floor.

Parker strode forward, reached down and grasped Egan's collar, hauled him to his feet, twisted him around. The man's battered lips made moaning, pleading sounds behind the blood-soaked beard.

"Egan," said Parker, "I want to talk to you."

"Don't hit …" Egan mumbled.

Parker cocked his fist, shook it in Egan's face.

"Listen first," he told him. "Then talk!"

Parker let go of the collar and Egan slumped to the floor, sat upon it with his legs sticking straight out in front of him. Parker squatted beside him.

Egan lifted a hairy hand, rubbed his beaten face.

"What you want?" he asked.

"You remember about Campbell being killed?"

"Sure," said Egan. "Sure, I remember. Luke done it."

"Luke didn't do it," snapped Parker. "Campbell was either shot from far off or with a small caliber gun. If Luke had shot him from behind the tree where the cartridge was found, the bullet would have gone through his body. Would have torn a hole straight through him. That gun of Luke's is a heavy job. Bone would never stop one of its bullets, fired at thirty feet."

Egan sat mumbling.

Parker reached out and shook him savagely.

"Do you understand?" he snarled.

Egan repeated, "Luke done it."

Parker slapped him, an open-handed blow that rocked his head.

Egan stared at him in dazed terror.

"Got to say Luke done it," he declared.

"Why?"

"Betz said so. Said for me to say …"

"Betz was the one who did it?"

Egan hesitated and Parker lifted his hand. Egan recoiled.

"Go on," said Parker. "What about Betz?"

"Betz did it," mumbled Egan, clawing at his beard with one jerky hand.

"Shot his own boss. What did he have against him?"

"Nothing. Just shot him. Paid to do it."

"Why?"

"Good way to start a fight."

"Figured the little outfits would rise up," said Parker, "and it would be an excuse to wipe them out."

"Sure," said Egan. He leered through the bloody beard. "Smart, eh?"

"Smart enough to hang you," said Parker, viciously.

"It was coming anyhow," said Egan.

"Sure, it was coming, anyhow," said Parker. "Only Betz helped it along a bit. Tell me, who paid Betz?"

Egan's mouth clamped shut and defiance crept into his eyes.

"Who paid him?"

Egan shook his head. Parker slapped him, first one side of his face, then another. Egan moaned.

Parker waited.

"It was Hart."

"And Danielson?"

"That's right, sheriff. Hart and Danielson."

"What about Horton? Did Horton pay him, too?"

Egan shook his head.

"You're sure of that? Horton wasn't in on it?"

"Horton didn't even know about it," mumbled Egan. "Couldn't trust him. Too damn soft-hearted."

Parker rocked on his toes, staring at the man.

So the Hashknife and Bar C were the ones that had engineered it. Hart and Danielson had signed the death warrant of their fellow-ranchman to touch off a range war, using the Turkey Track as a cat's-paw to do the dirty work. Hart and Danielson had deliberately murdered Campbell to carry out their plans. Not that either of them, likely, had anything against him, but it was an easy way, a simple way to do it.

And it had one extra angle—Campbell and Luke had been at guns' point for months. If it could be made to seem that Luke had done it, they figured, it might compromise the sheriff—might drive him out of office. And with the small outfits wiped out and the sheriff gone, the whole range would be theirs.

Egan made whining, mewing sounds.

"Look, sheriff, you ain't going to hold this against me. You're going to let me go. After all, I helped you. I was the one that …"

"Shut up," snapped Parker.

His hand reached out slowly and gathered in Egan's shirt front, twisted it tight.

"And now tell me about the cartridge that was found behind that tree."

"Oh, that," said Egan. "That was put there. I found the cartridge …"

"You mean you hung around and watched until Luke shot the gun, then sneaked in after he was gone and picked it up."

"I found it," protested Egan. "I just was riding along one day …"

"And you saw something shining on the ground."

"That's right, sheriff," said Egan, pleased. "You hit it right on the head."

"You'll have a hell of a time making a jury believe that," said Parker.

Feet crunched outside and Parker swung around, reaching for his gun.

Old Matt's shadowy form blotted out the moonlight in the doorway.

"Thought I heard a shot," he said.

"You took your sweet time coming," Parker told him.

"Hell," said Matt, disgustedly, "I had to get my pants on. Couldn't come out just in my shirttail. I came just …"

He stopped, staring at Egan.

“Tried to bushwhack me,” Parker explained.

“Sort of looks like it backfired on him.”

Parker nodded. “Spilled his guts,” he said. “Told me Betz was the one that killed Campbell. That .45-70 shell was planted so it would look like Luke had done it.”

“And now that you got the varmint, what are you going to do with him?”

“Got to take him along with me while I hunt up Luke,” said Parker. “Can’t let him out of my sight.”

“Take him back to jail,” said Matt.

Parker shook his head. “Sawyer’s in with them. He’d get word to the Turkey Track and they’d either have him out or kill him before I could get back.”

Matt shucked up his gunbelt. “Leave him here with me,” he suggested. “I’ll take downright good care of him.”

“Not a chance,” said Parker. “You got other things to do.”

“Like what?”

“Like getting together a bunch of the boys to wait for me in town. When I get back I got work to do.”

CHAPTER FOUR
Hideaway in Hell

Dawn was breaking over the Rattlesnake hills, the darkness rising from the ground against the inroad of thin morning light that revealed the shapes of trees and boulders.

Riding at a low jog, Parker searched the jagged tangle of the towering cliffs, hunting for the almost hidden mouth of that one small canyon which sprang out from the tumbled hills.

It'd been a long time since he had been here. Things somehow looked different than they did those days when he and Luke were hunting pirate gold and fleeing to safety before the imaginary thunder of pursuing redskins.

Gnarled, wind-whipped trees, twisted and maimed like cripples, clung to the tawny hills and it was one of these that he was looking for—one maimed and crippled tree that looked like an old man walking with a cane.

The lead rope tugged at his saddle horn and he twisted, shot a glance behind him.

Egan, hands tied behind him, sat hunched over in the saddle of the led horse. In the pale morning light his face was puffed and swollen and one eye was almost closed by the ring of black and battered flesh around it.

"How do you feel?" asked Parker.

Egan spat awkwardly. "Like hell," he said.

"We're almost there," Parker told him. "I'll let you rest a while."

"Look," asked Egan, "why don't we make a deal?"

Parker laughed harshly. "No deals, Egan. I'll need you on the witness stand."

"I could fix it up with Betz," said Egan. "He's a friend of mine. Pardners, see. All I got to do is say the word. We'll cut you in. Keep the job for life, get a rake-off on the side."

Parker did not answer, still sat half turned in the saddle, staring at the man.

"Betz would treat you right," Egan declared.

"Yes, I know. A bullet in the back."

Deliberately, Parker turned in the saddle. Egan was silent. They rode on into the dawn.

Suddenly, as if it had risen from the ground, the tree was there on the cliff rim, a tree that walked with a cane along the skyline.

Parker reined the buckskin in toward the cliff, saw the tree-masked opening that marked the canyon's mouth. Slowly, picking

their way, the horses advanced, sheer walls towering far above them, boulders scattered along the stream bed through which trickled a tiny flow of water.

Suddenly the canyon widened and a grove of trees appeared.

This was the place, Parker remembered. The place where he and Luke used to leave their ponies and climb to the cave.

His hand tightened on the reins, brought the buckskin to a halt. Parker sat, wide-eyed, staring at the two horses tethered in the grove. One, he knew, must be the one that Luke had ridden, but the other one was white.

A white horse! Only one person in this whole range rode a white….and that person was Ann Horton!

Behind him Egan growled at him: "What's the matter, sheriff?"

Parker did not answer, but spurred his horse forward, jerking at the lead rope.

There was no doubt the white horse was Ann's. Parker, squinting at it, recognized the saddle. He swung off the buckskin, tied it to a nearby tree, walked back to Egan's mount.

"Get down," he told the man.

Egan swung off awkwardly, stumbled a little when he hit the ground, then straightened, standing silently. Parker tied Egan's horse beside his own.

"Walk ahead of me," he told Egan. "That path over there." He pointed.

Egan nodded, trudged toward the path. Behind him, Parker wondered, mind groping for an explanation of the white horse.

Why should Ann Horton be here? What had brought her?

Warning signals jangled in his brain, but they were not clear. A trap? That was hardly possible. Egan had said that Ann's father knew nothing of the scheme and even if he had Ann would not lend herself to any part of it.

And yet the horse was there—tied beside the one that Luke had ridden.

Parker shrugged off the questions, gave his attention to the climbing trail ahead.

It angled sharply up the hillside, ran close against a sheer cliff that suddenly broke off, gave way to tangled rock and shrub.

"I hope," growled Egan through his battered lips, "that you know where you're going."

"Don't worry about that," said Parker, "I …"

A buzzing thing spun above Parker's head, hit the cliff and screamed. From ahead of them came the angry coughing of a sixgun.

Ahead of Parker, Egan hurled himself flat on the trail, wriggling like a snake toward a covering bush.

The sixgun coughed again and Parker threw himself to one side, hunkered against the wall of cliff, masked from the gun ahead.

Silence dripped through the morning, a brittle, fragile silence.

Parker called softly: "Luke!"

There was no answer. The single word came back in muted echoes from the hills, whispering echoes that called Luke's name again, getting fainter and fainter, as a dying man might call.

Hunched against the wall of rock, Parker gazed out over the rolling country that lay beyond the hills, a silver country in the morning sun … an empty country except for one bunch of cattle, dwarfed by distance. Nothing stirred. No moving horsemen, no smoking chimney signaling breakfast-making. Just rolling prairie and the silver grass.

Egan's whisper came to him, a mocking thing:

"Luck playing out, sheriff?"

Parker made no answer, but instead he called out again, raising his voice: "Luke! Luke, it's Clint!"

An answer came this time, Luke's voice:

"Come on up, but I got you covered. Keep your hands away from your guns."

"Luke, you locoed fool, I want to talk to you."

Luke yelled back: "Don't try for your guns."

Parker stepped out into the trail, prodding Egan with his foot.

"Up we go."

Egan protested violently. "He'll pot us soon as we show ourselves," he screamed. "He'll …"

Parker prodded him viciously, shutting off the words.

Slowly, Egan got to his feet, scrambled up the trail, body tensed, eyes searching the ground ahead.

The path ran along a ledge that clung close against the cliff wall and suddenly it twisted and they were there—in front of the cave.

Luke, long and lanky, stood to one side of the cave mouth, sixgun hand lifted, lips twisted into a smile that was grim and careful.

Against the wall of rock next to the cave opening stood Ann Horton, wide-eyed, hands behind her as she pressed herself against the cliff. Parker stopped in his tracks and stood staring at her in the morning light.

"She came because she thought you'd be here," said Luke. "Cripes, can you beat that!"

"She thought that I was with you?"

"Sure, figured you had turned me loose. Some of the Turkey Track outfit rode out to the Bent Arrow. Said both you and I were missing. She jumped to conclusions, Clint."

Ann stirred away from the wall, took a slow step forward.

"I know I shouldn't have done it," she said and her eyes saw only Parker. "I know I shouldn't have, but I couldn't help it. I couldn't let you ride off without me."

"You couldn't—" Parker choked on the words, was suddenly striding forward—and the girl was in his arms.

Luke chuckled. "I didn't believe her, Clint. But now damned if I don't."

"You showed me where the cave was," murmured the girl. "Remember, Clint, that day you told me how you dug for buried gold …"

"And you figured this is where we'd head?"

She nodded against his shoulder.

Luke broke in. "What was the idea of dragging Egan here?"

"Because he's the hombre that's going to spill the beans," said Parker. "He coughed up his…"

"Good morning," said another voice.

Parker swung around to face the direction the words had come from.

Betz stood on the trail, gun in hand, laughing at them without the sound of laughter.

One hand came up and he tipped his hat to Ann.

"It was nice of you, Miss Horton," he said, "to show us the way."

"To show you the way!" Luke bellowed.

"Why, certainly," said Betz. "We took the news to the ranch and waited for her to leave. Then we followed her."

"You never miss a single bet, do you," Parker commented bitterly.

"Never, sheriff," declared Betz.

His eyes narrowed and the bantering tone had vanished from his voice. "So you brought Egan with you."

Egan yelled in sudden panic. "I didn't tell him nothing, Frank. Not a single word. I never opened…"

"He just got through saying," Betz told him, grimly, "that you spilled your guts."

And the words were soft, too soft.

The gun steadied in Betz' hand.

"Damn you," said Betz. "I never liked you. I always knew that you were yellow."

"No, Betz!" screamed Egan. "Please Betz! I'm your friend…"

Eyes wide with terror, he backed away, mouth working and no words coming out.

Behind Parker, Ann screamed at him. "Look out!"

But it was too late. For a moment Egan tottered on the edge of the precipice, face twisted with fright, arms straining at the ropes behind his back, fighting to keep his balance. Then with a long, thin

scream he toppled over and plunged out of sight.

Betz' hard voice rapped out an order.

"Drop them!"

Parker's fingers loosened on the sixgun and let it slide back into his holster. Too slow, his mind told him, too slow. Watching Betz, he heard Luke's sixgun clatter on the rock.

Betz chuckled.

Parker held his arms half lifted, mind racing.

A slow grin spread over Betz' face, a leering grin of triumph.

"How do you want it?" he asked. "Gun or rope?"

Parker's lips moved and his mouth was dry. "What about the girl?" he asked.

"Never mind," Betz told him. "We'll take care of her."

His face was not a very pretty thing to look at.

An unseen hand knocked Betz' hat off his head and sailed it through the air. A bullet chugged against the cliff and from somewhere in the tangled terrain that lay across the canyon a rifle barked—a full-throated, growling bark that set up a chain of echoes.

Parker's hand dipped swiftly for his gun as Betz spun around to face the hidden rifle.

The rifle barked again and rock splinters flew from the cliff wall just above Betz' shoulder, while the bullet howled into the sky, tumbling end for end.

Betz ducked swiftly and was gone, back along the trail. Parker stood, gun in hand, staring foolishly.

Luke's voice chattered at him suddenly: "Clint, you recognize that gun! That's the old .45-70! The old man's out there, backing us!"

Another rifle rattled, three quick shots, flat, cracking, spiteful sounds. The .45-70 talked back.

Luke was running for the ledge.

Parker turned swiftly to Ann.

"Quick," he told her, "get into the cave—and stay there."

His left hand dipped to his belt, hauled out the second gun, thrust it at her.

"Use it if you have to."

Swinging around, he raced after Luke—but Luke already had disappeared.

From far below a rifle spanged and a sixgun answered. The .45-70 was silent.

Running swiftly, bent forward, Parker left the cliff wall behind him, reached the tangled land that plunged down toward the canyon. Ahead of him a tiny puff of smoke plumed from behind a tree and a rifle hammered.

Diving off the trail, Parker slung a quick shot at the tree, then was

skidding through the underbrush, driving deep beneath it in a flying, feet-first plunge.

The rifle churned and bullets clawed savagely at the bushes beneath which the sheriff lay. Body pressed tight against the ground, with the smell of leaf mold in his nostrils, he lay unmoving and watched the tree through the net of branches.

The canyon was quiet—no sign of the men who skulked through rocks and bushes to kill or be killed. No sign of the hidden, waiting guns. Somewhere a bird sang to the morning and far overhead the sun's first rays were painting the cliff tops.

Parker clutched the sixgun savagely. Everything had been going well—too well, he told himself. And now a thing like this would happen. Egan dead at the foot of the cliff—the one man who could have cleared Luke of the charge against him. Egan, with his hands tied behind him, falling from the ledge, falling to the rocks and trees below—killed by Betz as surely as if Betz had fired a bullet through his head.

And now—odds of five to one or more. Two sixguns and a rifle in an old man's shaky hands against a band of well armed men. Men who had to kill or be exposed for what they were. Men who would let nothing stop them …

Down the trail a sixgun hammered rapidly, shots rolling together until they seemed to be one long rattle.

The shots cut off and silence came again.

Parker let his breath out slowly.

His lips moved soundlessly. "One," he said.

Luke had gotten his man, for there had been no answering shot. But a man couldn't keep on doing that, couldn't keep on killing without being killed himself.

Something moved beside the tree beyond the bushes, a dark thing against the dark green of the shaded brush. Tensed, Parker watched. The dark thing projected farther and there was a sullen gleam, the gleam of light on steel.

Parker sucked in his breath, slowly raised the sixgun. The glinting thing was a rifle barrel and that dark projection would be the elbow of the man who held it.

His finger tightened on the sixgun trigger and the hammer eased back slowly. Then the gun leaped in his hand and a man sprang, howling, from behind the tree. The rifle struck the ground and slid slowly down the slope and the man was running, left hand holding the elbow of his right arm.

Parker's wrist bucked to the impact of the coughing gun and out on the canyonside the man was folding up, folding and falling as he ran, knees bending beneath him, feet scuffing in the leaves. Slowly he

pitched forward upon his face and rolled.

On the hillside above Parker a rifle clamored, hacking and spitting and the whistle of lead hissing through the bushes above him was like the sound of a sudden summer thunder storm.

Breath caught in his throat, Parker squirmed away, crawling on his belly.

Another rifle caught up the chuckle where the other one left off, chattered and yammered. The bushes swayed and rippled and leaves cut by the storming bullets fluttered down on Parker's back.

Parker's throat was dry, dry with sudden fear.

Two rifles bearing on him, others sneaking up, attracted by the sound of shooting and closing in on him.

A voice came to him through the underbrush.

"Better come out, sheriff."

He hugged the ground, red fury in his brain.

"Come out," said Betz' voice, "or we'll open up. We'll chop you all to hell."

He can't see me, Parker told himself. He can't see me or he'd have me shot. It's just a trick. A trick to make me move and tip off where I am.

One bullet plowed ground not six inches in front of Parker, throwing a shower of dirt into his face. Another clipped his hat with a tearing sound as it ripped through the cloth. Something stung his left leg.

Up the hillside a man was screaming and a sixgun was talking in jerky, tortured bursts of sound.

A sixgun! That would be Luke!

Parker came to his feet, lowered his shoulders like a battering ram, charged through the brush, heading for the sixgun sound.

A rifle chugged, but the shot was wide and Parker kept on going, scrambling up the hill in leaping bounds that sent loose rocks clattering down the slope.

The sixgun was silent and the man who had screamed was moaning, moaning and sobbing somewhere among the trees.

A woman's shrill cry rang out: "Clint … Clint!"

And then choked off, as if a hand had come across her mouth.

Breath sobbing in his throat, Parker leaped toward the sound. A rifle chortled and whining lead sang above his head.

He stumbled, bursting through a screen of brush, and there before him was Ann—Ann in the grip of one of the Turkey Track riders, an arm tight around her waist, holding her in front of him while he backed away.

At the sight of Parker the man's arm came up and the gun exploded in a belch of fire and smoke. Parker jerked to the impact of

the bullet as it scraped along his side.

Ann was struggling, fighting, eyes wide, lips tight and straight.

Parker jerked up his gun and as the girl bent forward, straining to break the grip of the arm around her, he pressed the trigger.

Ann stumbled forward, falling to her knees as the arm relaxed and towering over her, his throat ripped out by Parker's bullet, the man stood for an instant like a graven statue and then fell backwards, crashing like a falling tree.

Parker spun around, sixgun ready. Figures were storming up the hill, swiftly plunging forms moving from one tree to the next. The sheriff's sixgun hammered and down on the hillside a man spun in midstride, went rolling down the slope.

A rifle barked in steady tones and Parker felt the wind of winging death whisper past his cheek. Bullets chunked into the rising ground behind him.

He swung around and saw Ann running for a nest of boulders. He whipped two quick shots at the barking rifle and then the hammer clicked on an empty shell.

The girl was calling to him: "Quick, Clint—quick."

Bullets plowed the ground around him as he ran, but he reached the boulders, flung himself behind them, lay listening to the howl of ricocheting lead screaming off the rock.

A hand reached out and touched him.

"Clint, you all right …"

He stormed at her. "You little fool! I told you to stay back in the cave!"

"But they were shooting at you and I had the gun."

He sat up and fed cartridges into his Colt.

"Where's the gun you had?" he asked.

Her voice shook a little. "I dropped it."

On his knees, he stared across the little space that separated them, saw the tremble of her lip.

"Sorry," he said. "Sorry that I talked like that."

"Where's Luke and Matt?"

Parker shook his head. "Down the canyon somewhere, I guess."

He nodded at a niche between two boulders. "Get in there and stay," he told her. "Pure hell is apt to break loose any minute."

She slid into the niche and Parker crouched, sixgun ready, watching the trees and underbrush. They'll be working up the hill, he told himself, to get above us, and when they do, this nest of boulders wouldn't be worth a damn as a thing to hide behind.

Up the hill a rifle spat. A man's shriek rose above the din of the shot and then chopped off.

Parker tensed. That gun!

It spat again and a man was running through the trees, twisting and doubling like a hunted deer.

Deliberately, Parker lined him in the sights and pressed the trigger. The runner stumbled, crashed to the ground and bounced, flapped against a tree and then lay still.

The gun took up again, deliberate, steady, like a cornered bear.

"Matt!" yelled Parker. "Down this way, Matt!"

The old man whooped at him from up the hillside: "We got them on the run, lad. Open up!"

The bark of the .45-70 cut off his words and snapping, snarling rifles answered back.

A new sound came in, far off to the left—the steady rattle of a rasping sixgun.

Luke! That's Luke, Parker told himself.

He slid around the corner of the boulder, snapped his gun down on a bush overhung with powder smoke, triggered rapidly. A man burst from the bush, went zigzagging down the hill in wild, plunging leaps.

Other men were running, too. Scurrying down the hillside, plunging and sliding, running to escape the withering fire that was pouring from above them.

Parker leaped from behind the boulder, smoking sixgun snapping at the heels of the fleeing man.

His boots bit into the sloping ground, leaving long skid marks behind him as he strode down the hill, while above him old Matt's rifle growled and Luke's sixgun played a constant tune.

A bullet whipped past Parker's head and a gun crashed off to the left. Parker checked his stride and swung around, saw the man standing beside the scraggly tree at the foot of the cliff.

Red-faced, bull-necked, lips twisted with bitter hate, Betz raised his gun for another shot.

Parker shot from the hip, a quick snap shot that sent the bark flying from the tree. Betz' gun drooled fire and Parker staggered under the smashing power of the bullet that took him in the shoulder.

Numbed, Parker lifted his gun, took a slow step forward.

This one has to be good, his mind told him through the ache that spread across his body—this one has to count. If it wasn't, he knew that he would never had another chance.

Feet planted, he held himself upright and rigid for the moment, everything else blotted out but the red-faced man and the ugly snout of Betz' sixgun poised for another shot.

The gun in Parker's hand spat fire, bucked against his wrist. In front of him Betz jerked as if hit by a red-hot iron. His gun dropped from suddenly limp fingers and the man bent in the middle, as if he

had hinges in his stomach. When he hit the ground he was still—very still and limp.

Through a foggy haze, Parker drove his legs forward, walking toward the dead man—and stopped in astonishment.

Something rolled out from under the tree beside which Betz had stood, something that flopped and thrashed like a chicken with its head cut off.

Parker's legs were running and his mouth was shouting:

"Egan! Egan!"

Egan struggled to a sitting position, stared at him, blood-matted black bear working as his jaws made words.

"Afraid I'd never get out," he said. "Damn rope was fouled up with a branch."

"But you fell," gasped Parker. "I saw you …"

"Sure," said Egan. "I fell into a tree. Knocked me out for a while, but it saved me. When I come to I kicked around a little and then I fell the rest of the way."

He jerked his head at Betz.

Egan was swinging to and fro and the trees were dancing. Parker felt his knees giving way and suddenly he was sitting on the ground, face to face with Egan. He shook his head to clear away the fog and the trees stood still, jiggling just a little.

"He got you," said Egan viciously. His eyes were on Parker's blood-soaked shoulder.

"I hope to hell it's bad," said Egan. "I hope you croak, right along with Betz."

Parker clenched his teeth. "Don't worry," he told the man. "I'll live to see you behind bars …"

Feet pounded behind him and he twisted his head around. It was old Matt and Ann, tearing down the hillside. Ann a running deer, Matt a lumbering grizzly, beard floating in the wind, rifle waving in his steady hand.

Parker staggered to his feet, stood waiting them.

"We beat them, son!" yelled Matt. "We beat the britches off them!"

He stopped in front of Parker, looked soberly at the shoulder.

"Hurt bad, son?" he asked.

Parker shook his head. "Left arm won't work for a while," he said. "But the right's O.K."

To prove it, he held it out for Ann.

Old Matt was chuckling. "You and Luke thought you had the old man fooled," he said. "Never figured I knew where you sneaked off every Sunday afternoon."

Parker choked. "You knew about the cave all the time, then?"

“Hell, yes,” Matt told him, “but I kept my big mouth shut. Spoiled all your fun if you knew I knew.”

Parker tightened his arm about Ann, saw Luke coming through the woods.

“Everything’s all right,” he said to Ann. “Everything’s all right.”

Univac: 2200

Originally published in an original anthology entitled Frontiers 1: Tomorrow's Alternatives*, which was created by Roger Elwood and published by Macmillan in 1973 (there was a time when there was a vogue for original anthologies, and a breed of professional anthologists arose, who sometimes used a numbering system to help consumers avoid getting lost in the deluge of such), this story faded into the background of its era. But it nonetheless touched on a number of the themes Clifford Simak pursued over the years, hinting at newly sensed interconnections among them—and that, most of all, because it was so important to Cliff to explore the idea of whether humans have souls, and whether technology can help us to figure that out.*

And completely overlooked is the dropped—and not pursued—suggestion that something we now call "virtual reality" could make a difference in the creation of a newer, greener, way of human life.

—dww

He came home along a country lane, with grass growing between the dust-powdered cart tracks, with low stone walls to either side, erected long ago and now crumbling with the years, but with their crumbling hidden by the growth of creeping vines and screened by the bushes that grew along their bases. A verdant countryside stretched on every hand, with sleek cattle in the pastures and the smoke of cottage chimneys trailing up the sky. Larks sang in the grasses and a rabbit popped out of its hiding place along one of the stone fences and went bobbing up the road.

The corridor cyber, Andrew Harrison told himself, had knocked itself out on this one. He hoped it would be allowed to stay for a while, for it was most restful. But he knew it wouldn't stay. They never did. It was as if the cyber had so many patterns that it was in a hurry to get them all used up. Tomorrow, or maybe just a few hours from now, it would be the main street of a sleepy old historic village or a woodland trail or an old Paris boulevard, or perhaps some far-space fantasy. Although he doubted the patterns would ever all be used. He'd lived here—how long?—more than fifty years, and before that more than thirty years on one of the lower levels, and in all that time there had not been a repetition, close approximation perhaps, but never a repetition in the corridors.

He did not hurry. He strolled along sedately. He must be getting close to home and when he got there and had to leave it, he'd miss this country lane. He considered stopping for a while to sit upon one of the crumbling walls and listen to the meadow larks and watch the cloud patterns in the deep blue sky, but today he had no time to sit—today was a busy day.

Up ahead of him he saw the signpost that would have his name upon it and that was as far as he would go, for it marked the door of home. Someone else traveling this lane homeward would see another signpost, but no one else would see it, as no one else would see the one meant for his eyes alone.

He slackened his pace, loitering, reluctant to leave the road he traveled. But slow as he might go, he finally reached the signpost and turned off into the little footpath.

A door opened before him and beyond the door was home.

"Good afternoon, sir," said the cyber, Harley. "I hope you had a pleasant walk. Did you get the tobacco?"

"Very pleasant, Harley, thank you."

"And now …" said Harley.

"No," said Harrison. "Absolutely not. No drink, no conversation. Forget your role of the gracious servant. I have work to do."

"But, sir …"

"And no ski slope, no fishing stream, no beach, no nothing. Just leave me alone."

"If you wish it, sir," said Harley, considerably offended, "I'll leave you quite alone."

"Some other time," said Harrison, "I'll be quite grateful for your services."

"I am always at your service, sir."

"Where are the others?"

"You have forgotten, sir. They went out to the country."

"Yes," he said. "I had forgotten."

He walked from the entry into the living room and, for the first time in many months, realized, with something of a shock, how small the living quarters were.

"There is no need of size," said Harley. "No need of space."

"That's right," said Harrison, "and even if we needed it, or wanted it, we haven't got the space. And I wish, if it is all the same to you, you'd cut out monitoring me."

"I must monitor you," said Harley, primly. "That is my job and as a functioning, conscientious cybernetic system, I must do my job. For if I did not monitor you, then how might I best serve you?"

"All right, monitor," said Harrison, "but keep it to yourself. Can't you, for the next few hours, manage to be somewhat unobtrusive."

"I would suspect," said Harley, "that there must be something wrong with you, but my medical components come up with nothing more than normal and from that I must conclude that you have no illness. But I must confess to being puzzled. You have never been quite this way before. You reject me and my service and I am disturbed."

"I am sorry, Harley. I have something to decide."

He walked to the window and looked out. The country stretched away, far below—a bit more, he remembered now, than a mile below. A great belt of parkland lay around the tower and beyond the parkland wilderness—recreational space for all who wished to use it. For the land was no longer used, or very little used. A few mines, a few tracts of carefully harvested timber and that was all. After all of this was over, he decided, he and Mary would go west to the mountains, for a holiday.

"Why go?" asked Harley. "I can send you there, or to a place that is equivalent to mountains. It would be the same. You would not know the difference."

"I thought I told you to shut up."

"I am sorry, sir. It is just that my only thought is of your welfare."

"That," said Harrison, "is most commendable of you."

"I am glad you think so, sir."

Harrison turned from the window and went into his workroom. The room was small and crammed with equipment and a desk. The windowless walls closed in on him, but he felt comfortable. Here was his work and life.

Here, for years, he had worked. And was his work now coming to an end? Was that the reason, he asked himself, that he had delayed so long, to hold onto work and purpose until the very end? But he was not, he knew, being honest with himself; it was because he must be certain and on that trip down to the retail levels to buy himself a tin of tobacco, it had come to him that he was as certain now as he would ever be.

He grinned, remembering that trip—a hookey trip. There had been no need to go. He could have simply dialed his purchase and a moment later picked it out of the delivery chute. A man, at times, he told himself, will practice self-deceit. If he had wanted to take a walk, there would have been nothing in the world to prevent his taking it. If he had wanted to get away from these small, cramped rooms and Harley, there would have been nothing that could stop him. There had been no need to concoct an excuse to do so.

"I must remind you, sir," said Harley, "that there is never any reason for you to remain in what you think of as these small, cramped rooms. If you would but allow me, sir, I could place you on a lonely mountaintop, all alone upon it, with all the world to see and no one

else about, with as much space and freedom as any man might wish. It is because of such as I that humans require little living space. Granted, without the cybers these kind of quarters would be intolerable, but you need not live within them, no *need* to live within them, for the entire world and more is yours. Anything that a cyber can dream is yours and I really do believe …"

"Cut it out," said Harrison, sharply. "Another word from you and I'll phone replacement. Perhaps you have been too long in operation and …"

"I'll be silent, sir," said Harley. "You have my promise on it."

"See you do," said Harrison.

He sat easy in the chair behind his desk and the questions hammered at him: Could he be entirely certain? Had he overlooked some factor that should be considered? Had he carried his simulations into the future as deeply as he should? There was no doubt at all that the process would work. He had checked the process and the theory step by step, not once, but many times, and there was no question that the procedure and the theory were correct. Now it was no longer a matter of procedure, but a matter of effect. Could he be certain that he could chart the future course of mankind, with this new factor introduced, with enough precision to be sure that it would not produce social aberrations that might not be evident for centuries?

Future history, he reminded himself, could be changed by such unlikely items that one could take no chance at all.

Take the present world, he thought, take the mile-high cities and all the vacant acres, and one could trace it back to so short a time as two centuries before. A man could put his finger on the time when it began, marking the break with a cultural pattern that man had laboriously put together in five millennia of effort. Two hundred years ago man had lived in noisome cities that had stretched across mile on mile of land; today he lived in towers that scraped the very sky. Now, instead of industrial centers and power plants belching smoke and gobbling up the dwindling resources of the earth, man got his energy from fusion and needed only a fraction of the power he had needed then because he did with very little.

There had been no need, he told himself, for the change to have been as great as it had been; there had been those, history reminded one, who had thought of it all as madness. The idea had been carried farther than there was any need by the great revulsion that had risen at the olden way of life and this revulsion, a madness in itself, had swept all mankind beyond the point of common sense. And yet, perhaps, he thought, it was just as well, for because of it man had, in many ways, a better life and a cleaner planet.

He tried to imagine how it might have been in those days when

the rivers ran dirty to the sea and the sea itself was foul, when the air and earth were poisoned and a great noise beat against the land.

The world in which he sat, he thought, had begun to form with the first pollution-killed fish that floated to the surface, with the temperature inversion that had blanketed a city with the smog that it had spawned, with the cry of rage that had gone up against the smoking chimneys and the streams of effluents that were poured into the waters. We must build new cities, men had screamed, and the new cities had been built, but not quite the kind the screamers had envisioned; we must halt the overuse of resources, other men had shouted, and in time the old, time-honored rule of obsolescence had been scrapped and commodities had been built to last—not for ten years or twenty, but for centuries. As a result of this, in time fewer commodities were manufactured and the use of natural resources and energy had diminished and there had been less and less pollution and today the rivers ran crystal to the sea and the air was clean and fresh and the land lay quite unpoisoned since agriculture had been moved indoors and no longer utilized the soil

A city, he thought. Once a sprawling mass of structures, today three great towers: one for residential purposes, another for agriculture and industry the third for services—for government, education, arts and sciences, recreation. Three great towers reaching deep into the earth, rearing far into the air, and all operated by electronic wizardry. A people served by cybernetic systems that turned bleak corridors into country lanes, that gave a man an authentic simulation of every possible environment, that did one's chores and wiped one's nose and helped to do one's thinking and placed at each man's fingertips all the knowledge in the world.

And all of this, he thought, because a crackpot (the first of many crackpots) a bit more than two hundred years ago had bellowed out a maniac conviction that the earth was being poisoned.

From that first crackpot to this, so small a thing to bring about so great a change.

And that was why, he told himself, he must be absolutely certain.

He rose from his chair and went to the console, lifted the think-piece from its cradle and put it on his head. Sitting down in the operator's chair, he punched in the gross knowledge components, then fed in the factors. He had done it all before, he told himself; he would do it all again. It was not necessary, he was sure; he already knew. But in a thing like this nothing must be left undone.

It was all imagination, of course, but he seemed to see and be aware of, as had happened many times before, the great banked cores of all the knowledge banks that now were open to him—medical at Mayo's in Minnesota, legal at Harvard, theology in Rome, sociology at

California and history at Yale, all these and many more.

And it was not only knowledge. Knowledge in itself was not sufficient. It took more than that; it required the thought enhancement that was electronically built into the instrument. Man and computer now, human brain and robot brain, working in tandem, hooked into the basic banks of the world's entire hoard of knowledge, with the waiting relays that would open the way to other banks of knowledge should they be required.

Now that all was ready, he asked the question: What would be the long-range effect of intellectual immortality upon the human race? What if the minds of men could be transferred and imprinted upon robotic brains?

But that was not entirely right, of course. You would not imprint a human mind upon a robot brain, then range the brain upon a shelf with other brains and leave it there. You'd mount the brain upon some sort of ambulatory device that would serve the function of a body. You'd have, to some degree, a robotic body, perhaps extremely sophisticated, much more sophisticated than a human body, with many skills a human did not have, and yet it would not be, in many aspects, human. So you'd have intellectual immortality and, in a way, physical immortality, but not human immortality. To become immortal, a man must become a robot.

What was wrong with that? he asked himself. Where lay that nagging flaw? Why as he so reluctant to reach a fast decision? What was it that sent him back again, and yet again, to a simulation of the situation?

Man lived in a computer world, a robotic world, a cybernetic world. Every chore that man could think of was performed, upon command, by cybers. Most of his needs and wishes were fulfilled by cybers. The city in which he lived, the very home in which he lived was a cybernetic system. Men lived easily and comfortably with electronic contraptions and were happy with them. He trusted them and valued them and looked to them not only for his comfort, but for his happiness. The cybernetic system that was one's home could simulate another environment for one with precise exactitude. It could send you to a beach and it would not be just an impression of a beach, the suggestion of a beach. It would be a beach. You would feel the sand beneath your body, would feel the sea-wind blowing, would know the heat of sun, would hear the sound of surging water and be wetted by it. You would be upon a beach, not pretending you were there, not imagining you were there. You would be really there. It need not be a beach. It could be a forest, a mountaintop, a desert, a jungle, a raft upon the sea, the moon or Mars. It could send you back through time to dwell in a castle on the Rhine, to labor in the fields

with serfs on a medieval manor, to participate in a joust upon a field of honor, to sail with a Viking crew.

If one could live with and accept such fantasies as these (an easy thing to do, for they did not seem like fantasies), then why recoil from a fact that was no fantasy—that man, if he chose, could live forever? The robotic brain, or robotic body could not be a part of human rejection of or revulsion against such a situation, for in those simulations of other times or places to which one most willingly subjected himself, he became as intricately, or perhaps more intricately, involved with robotic functions.

Harrison sat before the console and as the thoughts built up within him, he felt, just beyond his reach, but available if he should need to reach out for them, the phantoms of all the massive portions of knowledge packed in the knowledge centers. As if, massed solidly behind him, were all these men, all these thinkers of the ages who had preceded him, standing ready with all their knowing and their counsel. A continuity, he thought, a great human continuity that spanned from the present day back to that old prehistoric ancestor who had come to terms with fire, to that sub-human creature that had struck two flints together to construct a tool. And that, he told himself, was a part of it as well. The minds of men were a resource and here were being used, but in each individual case, a resource with a lifetime limited to less than a century (although now, in this year of 2218, the old limit no longer held and a man, barring accident, could confidently expect to live a century and a half). But that was something new, just as immortality would be something new. And if human minds were a resource, why allow them to be limited by time? Why be content to use a mind for a century and a half and then be content to see it die? Certainly the human minds imprinted upon robotic brains would continue to contribute to humanity and the continuity of the human mind would be that much strengthened.

He did not sense the others moving in, but he knew they had moved in and he closed his eyes and was in a peopled darkness. There was a voice, speaking in the darkness, and that was strange, for in all the times before there had been no voice.

Second-class citizen? asked the voice and it seemed that he was rolling from the darkness, not walking from it, but rolling from it. And it seemed instead of rolling that he was scuttling, moving furtively, afraid of being seen, shrinking from the ridicule if he should be seen, knowing that in this human world he could not be human who had been human once. Although it seemed strange that he should feel this way, for the very ones who scorned him and reviled him in some later day might become as he.

Dead conservatism? Asked the voice in the darkness and when the

voice spoke he was no longer rolling, but was huddled in the darkness —a huddled machine among many other huddling machines and as he huddled there he heard the mumblings of his fellows and while he could not make out the words he knew what they said and from this he knew that they were huddling not only in the darkness, but in the past as well. There were the huddling machines, but there were others that were not machines, but rather immobile brains sitting in rows upon the shelves that stretched up and down this place wherein he huddled and these shelved brains seemed more content than those that had the bodies.

Death in life? the voice asked and when the voice stopped another voice spoke, a low and husky voice that belonged to the machine standing close beside him. Humanness, it said to him and all the others there, is not the matter of the mind alone, of the intellect alone. It is, as well, a matter of the body, of the women that we loved or the men we loved, of the things we ate, of lying on a hillside and feeling the earth beneath us and seeing the top branches of a great oak tree against the cloud-flecked sky, the feel of flesh on flesh when we shook hands with a friend, the smell of evergreen at Christmas, the glories of the lilies in the Eastertide… The low, husky voice went on and on, but he no longer heard it; he had shut his ears against it. it was saying all he felt and he did not need to hear and he did not wish to hear.

But would it be that way? Need it be that way? Why must these old bogeys rise? Could not humans accept their roboticized members, not as bogeymen, not as aliens, not as harsh reminders of what the future held for each of them, but as a metamorphosis, another way of human life, the only way of human life, if these were to be survival? It was either that or death. Surely, on the face of it, anything was preferable to death. Not that death, in itself, was bad, but it was oblivion, an emptiness, an ending and a nothingness and certainly man had a right to expect something more than nothingness.

Unless, he thought—unless there could be something to an afterlife. What if persisting as a human intellect should rob a man of an afterlife? But there was, he thought, no evidence, no evidence at all, that there was such a thing as afterlife. And the thought brought a clamor in his mind—a quarreling clamor from all those others with him.

When the clamor died down, he tried to think again. Perhaps, then, the thing to do was to investigate the theory of an afterlife. But how would one do that? How could one go about it? What kind of investigative process should one use, how could one evaluate the data, how could one be sure the principles applied to that evaluation would be valid?

He reached up and tore off the headset, thumbed the console back to deadness. What was the use, he thought. How could one be ever really sure?

He rose, shaken, from the chair, and went back to the living room. He stood before the window, but now there was nothing he could see. Clouds had moved in far below him and masked the landscape.

"A drink, sir?" asked Harley. "I think you need a drink."

"I think I do," said Harrison. "Thank you very much."

The liquor dispenser did not ask. It knew exactly what he wanted. He picked up the drink and turned back to the window.

It made no sense, he knew. It was all old prejudice and bias. Man had the right to expect a shot at immortality, if it were possible. And it was possible. Perhaps not in exactly the form that one might want it, but it was available. It was there and could be had.

The wastefulness, he thought, the utter wastefulness of death. If for no other reason, immortality would recommend itself on economic grounds. But no matter what might be decided, the old objections would still persist; they never went away. If he had stayed longer at the console, the favorable opinions would have wiped away and set at naught all but a tiny nagging doubt that would hang on forever. There was little use, he told himself, in returning to the console. The pattern had been set and it would not change.

He had gone, he knew, as far as he could go.

He went back into his workroom and sat down, not in the console chair, but behind his desk.

"Harley," he said, "please get me Univac."

"Surely, sir," said Harley.

In front of him a shimmer came, that shimmer no amount of work and research ever could get rid of, and the face was there. No body, as would have been the case if it had been a human, but just a face hanging in the air. It could as easily have been a human face, with body, Harrison reminded himself, a human simulation of the mighty system that was, in fact, the city, but the system itself had not gone along with that. "Let us be honest," it had said and it still was honest —not a human, but a system. And in accord with that it was not a human face that stared across the desk at him, but a strangely mechanistic face, the sort of face that an artist, full of artistic cynicism, might have conjured up to represent the system.

"Mr. Harrison," said Univac, "how good to see you once again."

"It is good to see you, too," said Harrison. "You recall, perhaps, that I spoke with you some time ago about a project I was working on."

"Yes, of course," said Univac. "Immortality. How is it getting on?"

"It can be done," said Harrison. "A human mind can be imprinted. I am sure of that."

"What does the computation say?"

"It says we can imprint. With no loss. No aberration. A human mind can be transferred intact."

"And be effective?"

"Entirely effective. There may be, eventually, some emotional loss. We can't be sure."

"Mr. Harrison, if that should happen, how important would it be?"

"Immensely important from the human viewpoint, perhaps. Although it might make the mind the more efficient, we are not, of course, entirely sure it would come about."

"You, of course, have done exhaustive simulation?"

"Yes," said Harrison, "exhaustive. That's what bothers me. It works out. There would be a period of social adjustment, certainly. At first, perhaps not all the people would wish the transfer. There might always be some who would shrink from it, although, as time went, there would be fewer of them. Perhaps the time would come when it would be accepted as a normal course of human life, a normal event in the life of any man. It might take some time for the public to accept the actual presence of robotic humans—not robots, but humans in robotic form—but that, in time, I am sure, would work itself out. Humanity would gain by it. We would be the richer by each human mind that could be saved from death. Our brainpower would increase, with no great additional drain on our natural resources."

"What is your problem, then?" asked Univac.

"A nagging doubt," said Harrison. "One that hangs in there and will not go away. Based on certain objections that have no real logic in them. They can be explained away, but they stay. It is, I suppose, a matter of human intuition, if not human judgment. I hate to go against human intuition."

"So would I," said the face that was Univac.

"What do we do, in such a case? Wait another century, with men dying all the time, to make up our minds?"

"Some controlled experiment, perhaps."

"But we couldn't do that. Without it leaking out. Can you imagine what might happen if such a thing leaked out? There'd be sheeted hell to pay. The public almost immediately would divide into two hostile groups and the pressure from each group would be unimaginable. It would be an intensely emotional thing, you see …"

"Yes, I know," said Univac. "I have something else in mind. You have heard, of course, although it is not yet public knowledge, that in another year or so we plan to send out several interstellar probes."

"Of course. I am a good friend of Anderson. We have talked about it."

"It strikes me," said Univac, "that it might be preferable to send out humans rather than mere instruments. There'd be instruments, of course, but also that other factor you mentioned—human judgment."

"A controlled experiment," said Harrison. "Yes, of course it would be that. And if planets should be found, roboticized human minds could go out onto them, no matter what the conditions were. They'd not have the physical limitations …"

"Perhaps," said Univac, "we could send several of them on some of the probes, so that we could study the interaction between several imprinted brains. And on at least one probe, a single imprint, to see how one mind along could react under …"

"It's a vicious experiment," said Harrison.

"Most experiments involving humans are vicious. But it would be a matter of free choice. It would be carefully explained to potential volunteers. To a man on the verge of death, it might be preferable."

"Yes, it might be."

"Then we'd know," said Univac. "We'd know if it would work. The trips would run to a number of years. But we wouldn't have to wait that long. If it appeared to be working, we could engineer a leak about what had been done, then sit back and wait for the reaction. I am willing to wager that in a short time we'd be faced with a wide demand that this business of immortality be made available, immediately, to everyone."

"And if the reaction were the opposite?"

"Then we'd deny the rumor. We'd say it never happened."

"Some day the probes would be coming home," Harrison pointed out. "What about our denial then?"

"By that time," said Univac, "it would be—how do you humans say it—a new ball game."

"May I say something, sir?"

"Why, of course, Mr. Harrison. What made you think that you should ask?"

"It is simply this," said Harrison. "You have shown yourself to be as low-down and sneaky as any human ever was. I would not have thought it of you."

Univac chuckled at him, a ghastly chuckle. "One thing you forget," he said. "Humans made me."

"But that's not good enough," Harrison told him, sharply. "Human is not good enough. We had hoped for something better. We made you, certainly—we built you through the years. We based a culture on you, not, perhaps, because we wanted to, but because we were forced to do so. Perhaps you were no more than the least

objectionable alternative, but you were all we had. We had hoped we had acted wisely and perhaps we did. But where we had no alternative before, we have none now. We are stuck with you and you, if you have a personality, an identity, a sense of I, as I think you have, likewise are stuck with us."

"I have identity," said Univac.

"Then, for the love of God," said Harrison, "stop being so damn human."

"Mr. Harrison," asked Univac, "what would you have me be? It was you who created me and …"

"We created religion, too," said Harrison. "And what did it ever do for us—the kind that we created? Not one man's concept of God, whatever it might be, but the concept of religion as created by our culture. For years we slaughtered one another in religion's name …"

"You created me and used me," said Univac, "for your human purposes."

"And you resent this?"

"No, I do not resent it. I am glad of it and, awkward as it may be for me to say it, rather proud of it. But since we're being truthful, let's be truthful all the way."

"O.K., then," said Harrison, "we created you and used you. We had allowed the profit motive to run away with us. We sold people things they didn't need and we built into these things imperfections so that people bought these things not once, but many times. And we changed the styles and we preached the gospel that one could not be out-of-date without, at the same time, being socially unacceptable. We improved our products and we hammered home the fact that the old models or old styles should be junked for the sake of those improvements, most of which were questionable improvements. And in order to turn out all these things for which we had created a psychological demand, we poisoned our air and water and used up our natural resources and there came a time when we had to call a halt, not to pollution so much as to the economic system that caused pollution, to that factor of our society that was eating up our coal and oil and gas."

"But, if you recall, Mr. Harrison, I also was created by the profit motive."

"That is true, of course. Perhaps it was somehow written in the stars that we must continue with the profit motive until we had developed the capacity for your creation."

"You believe events may be written in the stars?"

"I don't know," said Harrison. "But let us say that somehow, by whatever special dispensation, we were granted a second chance. That second chance was you. Today we live in cities that are you, without

great demands being made upon our limited natural resources. Today we specialize in services; we take in one another's washing. None of us is rich and none expects to be. We never think of monetary riches. And I think we may be much the happier for it. So now you must stand with us. If you don't, we're finished. I know there must be a million ways you could bring us to disaster."

"You must mistake me, Mr. Harrison. I have a sense of duty, perhaps of gratitude."

"The thing I must point out," said Harrison, "is that the quickest way for you to ruin us is to strive too much toward humanity. We need someone who thinks a little differently, someone who may understand and sympathize with our human needs and aims, but who can stand off a little distance and tell us when we're wrong and why we happen to be wrong. We would not, as I say, give up human judgment or any shred of our humanity, but now we need someone else, another kind of judgment to balance against our human judgment."

"You think this matter of immortality …"

"That's exactly what I mean. I came as close as I could. I think no human could come closer. But there is something, some blind wall, intruding from the human past, that makes human judgment in this area quite impossible. Here we need another kind of judgment, not to negate human judgment, not to rule it out, but to correlate with it. A survey panel, let us say."

"I could think on it," said Univac. "I could let you know. But I feel uncomfortable…"

"I know you do," said Harrison. "I know exactly how you feel. Don't you think I feel it, too? I giving up something that was an exclusively human function; you taking on something that is a small step beyond your province. But if we are to make it, if we are to carry on the human dream, each of us must do it. For this is not the only case. This may be the first one, but there will be others, many others as the years go on."

"I hope that you are right, sir."

"I hope so, too," said Harrison.

"I will let you know."

"Thanks," said Harrison. "I'll look forward to it."

The face of Univac faded and Harrison rose from his chair and went into the living room.

"It was a hard day, sir," said Harley.

"Yes, Harley, I think you could call it that."

"And now another drink?"

"That would be very fine."

"You are sure that is all."

"Quite sure. No beach, no ski slope, no…"

"I am aware of that," said Harley, hastily. "I thought perhaps a little music."

"I want to think," Harrison said, sharply.

"But man has thought so long," said Harley, "of so many things."

"That is right," said Harrison, "and he's never going to quit. The best that he can hope for is a little help to keep his thinking straight."

He sat in the chair in the tiny living room, with the drink in hand.

Sellout, he wondered, or a big stride forward?

The Creator

"The Creator" was the only piece of fiction Clifford D. Simak had published between November 1932 and July 1938. In later years, several different theories would be floated about the science fiction world in efforts to explain his apparent retreat, but I will not go into them here, except to suggest that the very existence of this story probably owes much to some of the same forces that resulted in Cliff's absence from the field.

"The Creator" was written in 1933, at a time when Astounding *had temporarily suspended publication and both* Wonder Stories *and* Amazing *were skipping months, seemingly teetering on the edge of extinction—the Great Depression had been going on for some time, too—and Cliff would later tell Sam Moskowitz (as quoted in the latter's book* Seekers of Tomorrow*, 1965) that he had not given up on science fiction, but that he felt at the time that there was no longer a market. But Cliff had been approached by William H. Crawford, who aspired to start a new science fiction magazine—a "literary" one—but could not offer payment for stories other than a lifetime subscription … in short, his planned publication was at that point little more than a fanzine.*

Cliff had been, and would continue to be, involved in the world of science fiction fandom, but he was a professional writer, and likely would have dismissed Crawford's overture, except for Cliff's belief that the market for science fiction had crashed. "'Had there been a market,'" Cliff told Moskowitz several decades later, "'the story would never have been written, for I would have slanted for that market.'" But Cliff let Crawford have the story, he said, "'out of sheer admiration for any man with guts enough to try a new science fiction magazine.'"

The story was published in the March-April 1935 issue of Crawford's Marvel Tales*, and it probably was not seen by more than a few hundred people. But, crude as it was, it seems quickly to have obtained a reputation as a groundbreaking story, as a defiance of publishing taboos. Various reprints appeared over the years.*

For all of its iconoclastic reputation, however, "The Creator" was not a complete break from Cliff Simak's previous writings; in fact, it fits neatly into the body of his exploration of religious thought: It was an extension of ideas that appeared in the author's very first published story, "The World of the Red Sun,"

and Cliff would return, time and time again, to the theme of religion and the ultimate meaning of the universe.

—dww

FOREWORD

This is written in the elder days as the Earth rides close to the rim of eternity, edging in nearer to the dying Sun, into which her two innermost companions of the system have already plunged to a fiery death. The Twilight of the Gods is history; and our planet drifts on and on into that oblivion from which nothing escapes, to which time itself, ageless as it may seem to us, may be dedicated in the final cosmic reckoning.

Old Earth, pacing her death march down the corridors of the heavens, turns more slowly upon her axis. Her days have lengthened as she crawls sadly to her tomb, shrouded only in the shreds of her former atmosphere. Because her atmosphere has thinned, her sky has lost its cheerful blue depths and she is arched with a sorrowful grey, which hovers close to the surface, as if the horrors of outer space were pressing close, like ravening wolves, upon the flanks of an ancient monarch of the skies. When night creeps upon her, stranger stars blaze out like a ring of savage eyes closing in upon a dying campfire.

Earth must mourn her passing, for she has stripped herself of all her gaudy finery and proud trappings. Upon her illimitable deserts and twisted ranges she has set up strange land sculptures. And these must be temples and altars before which she, not forgetting the powers of evil and good throughout the cosmos, like a dying man returning to his old faith prays in her last hours. Mournful breezes play a hymn of futility across her barren reaches of sand and rocky ledges. The waters of the empty ocean beat out upon the treeless, bleak, age-worn coast a march that is the last brave gesture of an ancient planet which has served its purpose and treads the path to Nirvana.

Little half-men and women, final survivors of a great race, which they remember only through legends handed down from father to son, burrow gnome-like in the bowels of the planet which has mothered their seed from dim days when the thing which was destined to rule over all his fellow creatures crawled in the slime of primal seas. A tired race, they wait for the day their legend tells them will come, when the sun blazes anew in the sky and grass grows green upon the barren deserts once again. But I know this day will never come, although I would not disillusion them. I know their legends lie, but why should I destroy the only solid thing they have left to round out their colorless life with the everlasting phenomena of hope?

For these little folks have been kind to me and there is a blood-bond between us that even the passing of a million years cannot erase. They think me a god, a messenger that the day they have awaited so

long is near. I regret that in time to come they must know me as a false prophet.

There is no point in writing these words. My little friends ask me what I do and why I do it and do not seem to understand when I explain. They do not comprehend my purpose in making quaint marks and signs upon the well-tanned pelts of the little rodents which overrun their burrows. All they understand is that when I have finished my labor they must take the skins and treasure them as a sacred trust I have left in their hands.

I have no hope the things I record will ever be read. I write my experiences in the same spirit and with the same bewildered purpose which must have characterized the first ancestor who chipped a runic message upon a stone.

I realize that I write the last manuscript. Earth's proud cities have fallen into mounds of dust. The roads that once crossed her surface have disappeared without a trace. No wheels turn, no engines drone. The last tribe of the human race crouches in its caves, watching for the day that will never come.

CHAPTER ONE
First Experiments

There may be some who would claim that Scott Marston and I have blasphemed, that we probed too deeply into mysteries where we had no right.

But be that as it may, I do not regret what we did and I am certain that Scott Marston, wherever he may be, feels as I do, without regrets.

We began our friendship at a little college in California. We were naturally drawn together by the similitude of our life, the affinity of our natures. Although our lines of study were widely separated—he majored in science and I in psychology—both of us pursued our education for the pure love of learning rather than with a thought of what education might do to aid us in earning a living.

We eschewed the society of the campus, engaging in none of the frivolities of the student body. We spent happy hours in the library and study hall. Our discussions were ponderous and untouched by thought of the college life which flowed about us in all its colorful pageantry.

In our last two years we roomed together. As we were poor, our quarters were shabby, but this never occurred to us. Our entire life was embraced in our studies. We were fired with the true spirit of research.

Inevitably, we finally narrowed our research down to definite lines. Scott, intrigued by the enigma of time, devoted more and more of his leisure moments to the study of that inscrutable element. He found that very little was known of it beyond the perplexing equations set up by equally perplexed savants.

I wandered into as remote paths, the study of psycho-physics and hypnology. I followed my research in hypnology until I came to the point where the mass of facts I had accumulated trapped me in a jungle of various diametrically opposed conclusions, many of which verged upon the occult.

It was at the insistence of my friend that I finally sought a solution in the material rather than the psychic world. He argued that if I were to make any real progress I must follow the dictate of pure, cold science rather than the elusive will-o'-the-wisp of an unproven shadow existence.

At length, having completed our required education, we were offered positions as instructors, he in physics and I in psychology. We eagerly accepted, as neither of us had any wish to change the routine

of our lives.

Our new status in life changed our mode of living not at all. We continued to dwell in our shabby quarters, we ate at the same restaurant, we had our nightly discussions. The fact that we were no longer students in the generally accepted term of the word made no iota of difference to our research and study.

It was in the second year after we had been appointed instructors that I finally stumbled upon my "consciousness unit" theory. Gradually I worked it out with the enthusiastic moral support of my friend, who rendered me what assistance he could.

The theory was beautiful in simplicity. It was based upon the hypothesis that a dream is an expression of one's consciousness, that it is one's second self going forth to adventure and travel. When the physical being is at rest the consciousness is released and can travel and adventure at will within certain limits.

I went one step further, however. I assumed that the consciousness actually does travel, that certain infinitesimal parts of one's brain do actually escape to visit the strange places and encounter the odd events of which one dreams.

This was taking dreams out of the psychic world to which they formerly had been relegated and placing them on a solid scientific basis.

I speak of my theory as a "consciousness unit" theory. Scott and I spoke of the units as "consciousness cells," although we were aware they could not possibly be cells. I thought of them as highly specialized electrons, despite the fact that it appeared ridiculous to suspect electrons of specialization. Scott contended that a wave force, an intelligence wave, might be nearer the truth. Which of us was correct was never determined, nor did it make any difference.

As may be suspected, I never definitely arrived at undeniable proof to sustain my theory, although later developments would seem to bear it out.

Strangely, it was Scott Marston who did the most to add whatever measure of weight I could ever attach to my hypothesis.

While I was devoting my time to the abstract study of dreams, Scott was continuing with his equally baffling study of time. He confided to me that he was well satisfied with the progress he was making. At times he explained to me what he was doing, but my natural inaptitude at figures made impossible an understanding of the formidable array of formulas which he spread out before me.

I accepted as a matter of course his statement that he had finally discovered a time force, which he claimed was identical with a fourth-dimensional force. At first the force existed only in a jumble of equations, formulas, and graphs on a litter of paper, but finally we

pooled our total resources and under Scott's hand a machine took shape.

Finished, it crouched like a malign entity on the work table, but it pulsed and hummed with a strange power that was of no earthly source.

"It is operating on time, pure time," declared Scott. "It is warping and distorting the time pattern, snatching power from the fourth dimension. Given a machine large enough, we could create a time-stress great enough to throw this world into a new plane created by the distortion of the time-field."

We shuddered as we gazed upon the humming mass of metal and realized the possibilities of our discovery. Perhaps for a moment we feared that we had probed too deeply into the mystery of an element that should have remained forever outside the province of human knowledge.

The realization that he had only scratched the surface, however, drove Scott on to renewed efforts. He even begrudged the time taken by his work as instructor and there were weeks when we ate meager lunches in our rooms after spending all our available funds but a few pennies to buy some piece needed for the time-power machine.

Came the day when we placed a potted plant within a compartment in the machine. We turned on the mechanism and when we opened the door after a few minutes the plant was gone. The pot and earth within it was intact, but the plant had vanished. A search of the pot revealed that not even a bit of root remained.

Where had the plant gone? Why did the pot and earth remain?

Scott declared the plant had been shunted into an outre dimension, lying between the lines of stress created in the time pattern by the action of the machine. He concluded that the newly discovered force acted more swiftly upon a live organism than upon an inanimate object.

We replaced the pot within the compartment, but after twenty-four hours it was still there. We were forced to conclude the force had no effect upon inanimate objects.

We found later that here we touched close to the truth, but had failed to grasp it in its entirety.

CHAPTER TWO
The Dream

A year following the construction of the time-power machine, Scott came into an inheritance when a relative, whom he had almost forgotten but who apparently had not forgotten him, died. The inheritance was modest, but to Scott and I, who had lived from hand to mouth for years, it appeared large.

Scott resigned his position as instructor and insisted upon my doing the same in order that we might devote our uninterrupted time to research.

Scott immediately set about the construction of a larger machine, while I plunged with enthusiasm into certain experiments I had held in mind for some time.

It was not until then that we thought to link our endeavors. Our research had always seemed separated by too great a chasm to allow collaboration beyond the limited mutual aid of which we were both capable and which steadily diminished as our work progressed further and further, assuming greater and greater complications, demanding more and more specialization.

The idea occurred to me following repetition of a particularly vivid dream. In the dream I stood in a colossal laboratory, an unearthly laboratory, which seemed to stretch away on every hand for inconceivable distances. It was equipped with strange and unfamiliar apparatus and uncanny machines. On the first night the laboratory seemed unreal and filled with an unnatural mist, but on each subsequent occasion it became more and more real, until upon awakening I could reconstruct many of its details with surprising clarity. I even made a sketch of some of the apparatus for Scott and he agreed that I must have drawn it from the memory of my dream. No man could have imagined unaided the sketches I spread upon paper for my friend.

Scott expressed an opinion that my research into hypnology had served to train my “consciousness units” to a point where they had become more specialized and were capable of retaining a more accurate memory of their wandering. I formulated a theory that my “consciousness units” had actually increased in number, which would account in a measure for the vividness of the dream.

“I wonder,” I mused, “if your time-power would have any influence upon the units.”

Scott hummed under his breath. “I wonder,” he said.

The dream occurred at regular intervals. Had it not been for my

absorption in my work, the dream might have become irksome, but I was elated, for I had found in myself a subject for investigation.

One night Scott brought forth a mechanism resembling the headphones of early radio sets, on which he had been working for weeks. He had not yet explained its purpose.

"Pete," he said, "I want you to move your cot near the table and put on this helmet. When you go to sleep I'll plug it in the time-power. If it has any effect upon consciousness units, this will demonstrate it."

He noticed my hesitation.

"Don't be afraid," he urged. "I will watch beside you. If anything goes wrong, I'll jerk the plug and wake you."

So I put on the helmet and, with Scott Marston sitting in a chair beside my cot, went to sleep.

That night I seemed to actually walk in the laboratory. I saw no one, but I examined the place from end to end. I distinctly remember handling strange tools, the use of which I could only vaguely speculate upon. Flanking the main laboratory were many archways, opening into smaller rooms, which I did not investigate. The architecture of the laboratory and the archways was unbelievably alien, a fact I had noticed before but had never examined in such minute detail.

I opened my eyes and saw the anxious face of Scott Marston above me.

"What happened, Pete?" he asked.

I grasped his arm.

"Scott, I was there. I actually walked in the laboratory. I picked up tools. I can see the place now, plainer than ever before."

I saw a wild light come into his eyes. He rose from the chair and stood towering above me as I propped myself up on my arms.

"Do you know what we've found, Pete! Do you realize that we can travel in time, that we can explore the future, investigate the past? We are not even bound to this sphere, this plane of existence. We can travel into the multi-dimensions. We can go back to the first flush of eternity and see the cosmos born out of the womb of nothingness! We can travel forward to the day when all that exists comes to an end in the ultimate dispersion of wasted energy, when even space may be wiped out of existence and nothing but frozen time remains!"

"What do you mean, Scott? Are you mad?"

His eyes gleamed.

"Not mad, Pete. Victorious! We can build a machine large enough, powerful enough, to turn every cell of our bodies into consciousness units. We can travel in body as well as in thought. We can live thousands of lifetimes, review billions of years. We can visit

undreamed-of planets, unknown ages. We hold time in our hands!"

He beat his clenched fists together.

"That plant we placed in the machine. My God, Pete, do you know what happened to it? It wasn't shunted into another dimension. What primordial memories did that plant hold? Where is it now? Is it in some swamp of the Carboniferous age? Has it returned to its ancestral era?"

Years passed, but we scarcely noticed their passing.

Our hair greyed slightly at the temples and the mantle of youth dropped slowly from us. No fame came to us, for our research had progressed to a point where it would have strained even the most credulous mind to believe what we could have unfolded.

Scott built his larger time-power machine, experimented with it, devised new improvements, discovered new details … and rebuilt it, not once, but many times. The ultimate machine, squatting like an alien god in our workshop, bore little resemblance to the original model.

On my part, I delved more deeply into my study of dreams, relentlessly pursuing my theory of consciousness units. My progress necessarily was slower than that of my friend, as I was dealing almost entirely with the abstruse, although I tried to make it as practical as possible, while Scott had a more practical and material basis for his investigations.

Of course, we soon decided to make the attempt to actually transfer our bodies into the laboratory of my dreams. That is, we proposed to transform all the electrons, all the elements of our bodies, into consciousness units through the use of the time-power. A more daring scheme possibly had never been conceived by man.

In an attempt to impress upon my friend's mind a picture of the laboratory, I drew diagrams and pictures, visiting the laboratory many times, with the aid of the time-power, to gather more detailed data on the place.

It was not until I used hypnotism that I finally was able to transfer to Scott's mind a true picture of that massive room with its outre scientific equipment.

It was a day of high triumph when Scott, placed under the influence of the time-power, awoke to tell me of the place I had visited so often. It was not until then that we could be absolutely sure we had accomplished the first, and perhaps most difficult, step in our great experiment.

I plunged into a mad study of the psychology of the Oriental ascetic, who of all people was the furthest advanced in the matter of concentration, the science of will power, and the ability to subjugate the body to the mind.

Although my studies left much to be desired, they nevertheless pointed the way for us to consciously aid the time-power element in reducing our corporeal beings to the state of consciousness units necessary for our actual transportation to the huge laboratory with which we had both grown so familiar.

There were other places than the dream-laboratory, of course. Both of us, in our half-life imparted by the time-power, visited other strange places, the location of which in time and space we could not determine. We looked upon sights which would have blasted our mortal sanity had we gazed upon them in full consciousness. There were times when we awoke with blanched faces and told each other in ghastly, fear-ridden whispers of the horrors that dwelled in some unprobed dimension of the unplumbed depths of the cosmos. We stared at shambling, slithering things which we recognized as the descendants of entities, or perhaps the very entities, which were told of in manuscripts written by ancient men versed in the blackest of sorcery, and still remembered in the hag-ridden tales of benighted people residing in the hinterlands.

But it was upon the mysterious laboratory that we centered all our efforts. It had been our first real glimpse into the vast vista to which we had raised the veil and to it we remained true, regarding those other places which we glimpsed as mere side excursions into the recondite world we had discovered.

CHAPTER THREE
In the Creator's Laboratory

At last the day arrived when we were satisfied we had advanced sufficiently far in our investigations and had perfected our technique to a point where we might safely attempt an actual excursion into the familiar, yet unknown, realm of the dream-laboratory.

The completed and improved time-power machine squatted before us like a hideous relic out of the forgotten days of an earlier age, its weird voice filling the entire house, rising and falling, half the time a scream, half the time a deep murmur. Its polished sides glistened evilly and the mirrors set about it, at inconceivable angles in their relation to each other, caught the glare from the row of step-up tubes across the top, reflecting the light to bathe the entire creation in an unholy glow.

We stood before it, our hair tinged with gray, our faces marked by lines of premature age. We were young men grown old in the service of our ambition and vast curiosity.

After ten years we had created a thing that I now realize might have killed us both. But at that time we were superbly confident. Ten years of molding metal and glass, harnessing and taming strange powers! Ten years of molding brains, of concentrating and stepping up the sensitivity and strength of our consciousness until, day and night, there lurked in the back of our brains an image of that mysterious laboratory. As our consciousness direction had been gradually narrowed, the laboratory had become almost a second life to us.

Scott pressed a stud on the side of the machine and a door swung outward, revealing an interior compartment which yawned like a black maw. In that maw was no hint of the raw power and surging strength revealed by the exterior. Yet, to the uninitiated, it would have held a horrible threat of its own.

Scott stepped through the door into the pitch black interior; gently he lowered himself into the reclining seat, reaching out to place his hands on the power controls.

I slid in beside him and closed the door. As the last ray of light was shut out, absolute blackness enveloped us. We fitted power helmets on our heads. Terrific energy poured through us, beating through our bodies, seeming to tear us to pieces.

My friend stretched forth a groping hand. Fumbling in the darkness, I found it. Our hands closed in a fierce grip, the handshake of men about to venture into the unknown.

I fought for control of my thoughts, centered them savagely upon

the laboratory, recalling, with a super-effort, every detail of its interior. Then Scott must have shoved the power control full over. My body was pain-racked, then seemed to sway with giddiness. I forgot my body. The laboratory seemed nearer, it seemed to flash up at me. I was falling toward it, falling rapidly. I was a detached thought speeding along a directional line, falling straight into the laboratory … and I was very ill.

My fall was suddenly broken, without jar or impact.

I was standing in the laboratory. I could feel the cold of the floor beneath my feet.

I glanced sidewise and there stood Scott Marston and my friend was stark naked. Of course, we would be naked. Our clothing would not have been transported through the time-power machine.

"It didn't kill us," remarked Scott.

"Not even a scratch," I asserted.

We faced one another and shook hands, solemnly, for again we had triumphed and that handshake was a self-imposed congratulation.

We turned back to the room before us. It was a colorful place. Vari-colored liquids reposed in gleaming containers. The furniture, queerly carved and constructed along lines alien to any earthly standard, seemed to be of highly polished, iridescent wood. Through the windows poured a brilliant blue daylight. Great globes suspended from the ceiling further illuminated the building with a soft white glow.

A cone of light, a creamy white faintly tinged with pink, floated through an arched doorway and entered the room. We stared at it. It seemed to be light, yet was it light? It was not transparent and although it gave one the impression of intense brilliance, its color was so soft that it did not hurt one's eyes to look at it.

The cone, about ten feet in height, rested on its smaller end and advanced rapidly toward us. Its approach was silent. There was not even the remotest suggestion of sound in the entire room. It came to a rest a short distance in front of us and I had an uncanny sense that the thing was busily observing us.

"Who are you?"

The voice seemed to fill the room, yet there was no one there but Scott and I, and neither of us had spoken. We looked at one another in astonishment and then shifted our gaze to the cone of light, motionless, resting quietly before us.

"I am speaking," said the Voice and instantly each of us knew that the strange cone before us had voiced the words.

"I am not speaking," went on the Voice. "That was a misstatement. I am thinking. You hear my thoughts. I can as easily hear yours."

"Telepathy," I suggested.

"Your term is a strange one," replied the Voice, "but the mental image the term calls up tells me that you faintly understand the principle.

"I perceive from your thoughts that you are from a place which you call the Earth. I know where the Earth is located. I understand you are puzzled and discomfited by my appearance, my powers, and my general disresemblance to anything you have ever encountered. Do not be alarmed. I welcome you here. I understand you worked hard and well to arrive here and no harm will befall you."

"I am Scott Marston," said my friend, "and this man is Peter Sands."

The thoughts of the light-cone reached out to envelope us and there was a faint tinge of rebuke, a timbre of pity at what must have appeared to the thing as unwarranted egotism on our part.

"In this place there are no names. We are known by our personalities. However, as your mentality demands an identifying name, you may think of me as the Creator.

"And now, there are others I would have you see."

He sounded a call, a weird call which seemed to incorporate as equally a weird name.

There was a patter of feet on the floor and from an adjoining room ran three animal-like figures. Two were similar. They were pudgy of body, with thick, short legs which terminated in rounded pads that made sucking sounds as they ran. They had no arms, but from the center of their bulging chests sprang a tentacle, fashioned somewhat after the manner of an elephant's trunk, but with a number of small tentacles at its end. Their heads, rising to a peak from which grew a plume of gaily-colored feathers, sat upon their tapering shoulders without benefit of necks.

The third was an antithesis of the first two. He was tall and spindly, built on the lines of a walking stick insect. His gangling legs were three-jointed. His grotesquely long arms dangled almost to the floor. Looking at his body, I believed I could have encircled it with my two hands. His head was simply an oval ball set on top of the stick-like body. The creature more nearly resembled a man than the other two, but he was a caricature of a man, a comic offering from the pen of a sardonic cartoonist.

The Creator seemed to be addressing the three.

"Here," he said, "are some new arrivals. They came here, I gather, in much the same manner you did. They are great scientists, great as yourselves. You will be friends."

The Creator turned his attention to us.

"These beings which you see came here as you did and are my

guests as you are my guests. They may appear outlandish to you. Rest assured that you appear just as queer to them. They are brothers of yours, neighbors of yours. They are from your—"

I received the impression of gazing down on vast space, filled with swirling motes of light.

"He means our solar system," suggested Scott.

Carefully I built up in my mind a diagram of the solar system.

"No!" The denial crashed like an angry thunder-bolt upon us. Again the image of unimaginable space and of thousands of points of light, of swirling nebulae, of solar systems, mighty double suns and island universes.

"He means the universe," said Scott.

"Certainly they came from our universe," I replied. "The universe is everything, isn't it—all existing things?"

Again the negative of the Creator burned its way into our brains.

"You are mistaken, Earthman. Your knowledge here counts as nothing. You are mere infants. Come, I will show you what your universe consists of."

CHAPTER FOUR
Our Universe?

Streamers of light writhed down from the cone toward us. As we shrank back they coiled about our waists and gently lifted us. Soothing thoughts flowed over us, instructions to commit ourselves unreservedly to the care of the Creator, to fear no harm. Under this reassurance, my fears quieted. I felt that I was under the protection of a benevolent being, that his great power and compassion would shield me in this strange world. A Creator, in very truth!

The Creator glided across the floor to set us on our feet on the top of a huge table, which stood about seven feet above the floor level.

On the table top, directly before me, I saw a thin oval receptacle, made of a substance resembling glass. It was about a foot across its greatest length and perhaps a little more than half as wide and about four inches deep. The receptacle was filled with a sort of grayish substance, a mass of putty-like material. To me it suggested nothing more than a mass of brain substance.

"There," said the Creator, pointing a light-streamer finger at the disgusting mass, "is your universe."

"What!" cried Scott.

"It is so," ponderously declared the Creator.

"Such a thing is impossible," firmly asserted Scott. "The universe is boundless. At one time it was believed that it was finite, that it was enclosed by the curvature of space. I am convinced, however, through my study of time, that the universe, composed of millions of overlapping and interlocking dimensions, can be nothing but eternal and infinite. I do not mean that there will not be a time when all matter will be destroyed, but I do maintain—"

"You are disrespectful and conceited," boomed the thought vibrations of the Creator. "That is your universe. I made it. I created it. And more. I created the life that teems within it. I was curious to learn what form that life would take, so I sent powerful thought vibrations into it, calling that life out. I had little hope that it had developed the necessary intelligence to find the road to my laboratory, but I find that at least five of the beings evolving from my created life possessed brains tuned finely enough to catch my vibrations and possessed sufficient intelligence to break out of their medium. You are two of these five. The other three you have just seen."

"You mean," said Scott, speaking softly, "that you created matter and then went further and created life?"

"I did."

I stared at the putty-like mass. The universe! Millions of galaxies composed of millions of suns and planets—all in that lump of matter!

"This is the greatest hoax I've ever seen," declared Scott, a deliberate note of scorn in his voice. "If that is the universe down there, how are we so big? I could step on that dish and break the universe all to smithereens. It doesn't fit."

The light-finger of the Creator flicked out and seized my friend, wafting him high above the table. The Creator glowed with dull flashes of red and purple.

His thought vibrations filled the room to bursting with their power.

"Presumptuous one! You defy the Creator. You call his great work a lie! You, with your little knowledge! You, a specimen of the artificial life I created, would tell me, your very Creator, that I am wrong!"

I stood frozen, staring at my friend, suspended above me at the end of the rigid light-streamer. I could see Scott's face. It was set and white, but there was no sign of fear upon it.

His voice came down to me, cold and mocking.

"A jealous god," he taunted.

The Creator set him down gently beside me. His thoughts came to us evenly, with no trace of his terrible anger of only a moment before.

"I am not jealous. I am above all your imperfect emotions. I have evolved to the highest type of life but one—pure thought. In time I will achieve that. I may grow impatient at times with your tiny brains, with your imperfect knowledge, with your egotism, but beyond that I am unemotional. The emotions have become unnecessary to my existence."

I hurried to intervene.

"My friend spoke without thinking," I explained. "You realize this is all unusual to us. Something beyond any previous experience. It is hard for us to believe."

"I know it must be hard for you to understand," agreed the Creator. "You are in an ultra-universe. The electrons and protons making up your body have grown to billions and billions of times their former size, with correspondingly greater distances between them. It is all a matter of relativity. I did not consciously create your universe, I merely created electrons and protons. I created matter. I created life and injected it into the matter.

"I learned from the three who preceded you here that everything upon my electrons and protons, even my very created electrons and protons, are themselves composed of electrons and protons. This I had not suspected. I am at a loss to explain it. I am beginning to believe that one will never find an end to the mysteries of matter and life. It may be that the electrons and protons you know are composed of

billions of infinitely smaller electrons and protons."

"And I suppose," mocked Scott, "that you, the Creator, may be merely a bit of synthetic life living in a universe that is in turn merely a mass of matter in some greater laboratory."

"It may be so," said the Creator. "My knowledge has made me very humble."

Scott laughed.

"And now," said the Creator, "if you will tell me what food and other necessities you require to sustain life, I will see you are provided for. You also will wish to build the machine which will take you back to Earth once more. You shall be assigned living quarters and may do as you wish. When your machine is completed, you may return to Earth. If you do not wish to do so, you are welcome to remain indefinitely as my guests. All I wished you to come here for was to satisfy my curiosity concerning what forms my artificial life may have taken."

The tentacles of light lifted us carefully to the floor and we followed the Creator to our room, which adjoined the laboratory proper and was connected to it by a high, wide archway. What the place lacked in privacy, it made up in beauty. Finished in pastel shades, it was easy on the eyes and soothing to one's nerves.

We formed mind pictures of beds, tables, and chairs. We described our foods and their chemical composition. Water we did not need to describe. The Creator knew instantly what it was. It, of all the necessities of our life, however, seemed the only thing in common with our Earth contained in this ultra-universe into which we had projected ourselves.

In what seemed to us a miraculously short time our needs were provided. We were supplied with furniture, food and clothing, all of which apparently was produced synthetically by the Creator in his laboratory.

Later we were to learn that the combining of elements and the shaping of the finished product was a routine matter. A huge, yet simple machine was used in the combination and fixing of the elements.

Steel, glass, and tools, shaped according to specifications given the Creator by Scott, were delivered to us in a large work-room directly off the laboratory where our three compatriots of the universe were at work upon their machines.

The machine being constructed by the lone gangling creature, which Scott and I had immediately dubbed the "walking-stick-man," resembled in structure the creature building it. It was shaped like a pyramid and into its assembly had gone hundreds of long rods.

The machine of the elephant-men was a prosaic affair, shaped like

a crude box of some rubber-like material, but its inner machinery, which we found to be entirely alien to any earthly conceptions, was intricate.

From the first the walking-stick-man disregarded us except when we forced our attentions on him.

The elephant-men were friendly, however.

We had hardly been introduced into the workshop before the two of them attempted to strike up an acquaintance with us.

We spoke to them as they stood before us, but they merely blinked their dull expressionless eyes. They touched us with their trunks, and we felt faint electric shocks which varied in intensity, like the impulses traveling along a wire, like some secret code tapped out by a telegrapher.

"They have no auditory sense," said Scott. "They talk by the transmission of electrical impulses through their trunks. There's no use talking to them."

"And in a thousand years we might figure out their electrical language," I replied.

After a few more futile attempts to establish communication Scott turned to the task of constructing the time-power machine, while the elephant-men padded back to their own work.

I walked over to the walking-stick-man and attempted to establish communication with him, but with no better results. The creature, seeming to resent my interruption of his work, waved his hands in fantastic gestures, working his mouth rapidly. In despair, I realized that he was talking to me, but that his jabbering was pitched too high for my ear to catch.

Here were representatives of three different races, all three of a high degree of intelligence, else they never would have reached this super-plane, and not a single thought, not one idea could they interchange. Even had a communication of ideas been possible, I wondered if we could have found any common ground of understanding.

I stared at the machines. They were utterly different from each other and neither bore any resemblance to ours. Undoubtedly they all operated on dissimilar principles.

In that one room adjoining the main laboratory were being constructed three essentially different types of mechanisms by three entirely different types of beings. Yet each machine was designed to accomplish the same result and each of the beings was striving for the same goal!

Unable to assist Scott in his building of the time-power machine, I spent the greater part of my waking hours in roaming about the laboratory, in watching the Creator at work. Occasionally I talked to

him. At times he explained to me what he was doing, but I am afraid I understood little of what he told me.

One day he allowed me to look through a microscope at a part of the matter he had told us contained our universe.

I was unprepared for what I saw. As I peered into the complicated machine, I saw protons, electrons! Judged by earthly standards, they were grouped peculiarly, but their formation corresponded almost exactly to our planetary system. I sensed that certain properties in that master-microscope created an optical illusion by grouping them more closely than were their actual corresponding distances. The distance between them had been foreshortened to allow an entire group to be within a field of vision.

But this was impossible! The very lenses through which I was looking were themselves formed of electrons and protons! How could they have any magnifying power?

The Creator read my thoughts and tried to explain, but his explanation was merely a blur of distances, a mass of outlandish mathematical equations and a pyramiding of stupendous formulas dealing with the properties of light. I realized that with the Creator the Einstein equations were elementary, that the most intricate mathematics conceived by man were as rudimentary to him as simple addition.

He must have realized it, too, for after that he did not attempt to explain anything to me. He made it plain, however, that I was welcome to visit him at his work, and as time passed, he came to take my presence as a matter of course. At times he seemed to forget that I was about.

The work on the time-power machine was progressing steadily under Scott's skillful hands. I could see that the other two machines were nearing completion, but that my friend was working with greater speed. I calculated that all three of the machines would be completed at practically the same time.

"I don't like this place," Scott confided to me. "I want to get the machine built and get out of here as soon as I can. The Creator is a being entirely different from us. His thought processes and emotional reflexes can bear little resemblance to ours. He is further advanced along the scale of life than we. I am not fool enough to believe he accepts us as his equals. He claims he created us. Whether he did or not, and I can't bring myself to believe that he did, he nevertheless believes he did. That makes us his property—in his own belief, at least—to do with as he wishes. I'm getting out of here before something happens."

One of the elephant-men, who had been working with his partner, approached us as we talked. He tapped me gently with his trunk and

then stood stupidly staring at us.

"Funny," said Scott. "That fellow has been bothering me all day. He's got something he wants to tell us, but he doesn't seem to be able to get it across."

Patiently I attempted an elementary language, but the elephant-man merely stared, unmoved, apparently not understanding.

The following day I secured from the Creator a supply of synthetic paper and a sort of black crayon. With these I approached the elephant-men and drew simple pictures, but again I failed. The strange creatures merely stared. Pictures and diagrams meant nothing to them.

The walking-stick-man, however, watched us from across the room, and after the elephant-men had turned away to their work, he walked over to where I stood and held out his hands for the tablet and crayon. I gave them to him. He studied my sketches for a moment, ripped off the sheet and rapidly wielded the crayon. He handed back the tablet. On the sheet were a number of hieroglyphics. I could not make head or tail of them. For a long time the two of us labored over the tablet. We covered the floor with sheets covered with our scribbling, pictures, and diagrams. We quit in despair after advancing no further than recognizing the symbols for the cardinal numbers.

It was apparent that not only the elephant-men but the walking-stick-man as well wished to communicate something to us. Scott and I discussed it often, racking our brains for some means to establish communication with our brothers in exile.

CHAPTER FIVE
Creation—and Destruction

It was shortly after this I made the discovery that I was able to read the unprojected thoughts of the Creator. I imagine that this was made possible by the fact that our host paid little attention to me as he went about his work. Busy with his tasks, his thoughts must have seeped out as he mulled over the problems confronting him. It must have been through this thought seepage that I caught the first of his unprojected brain-images.

At first I received just faint impressions, sort of half-thoughts. Realizing what was occurring, I concentrated upon his thoughts, endeavoring to bore into his brain, to probe out those other thoughts which lay beneath the surface. If it had not been for the intensive mind training which I had imposed upon myself prior to the attempt to project my body through the time-power machine, I am certain I would have failed in my purpose. Without this training, I doubt if I would have been able to read his thoughts unbidden in the first place, and in the second, could never have kept him from learning that I had.

Remembering the suspicions held by my friend, I realized that my suddenly discovered ability might be turned to our advantage. I realized also that this ability would be worthless should the Creator learn of it. In such case, he would be on the alert and would close his thought processes to me. My hope lay in keeping any suspicion disarmed. Therefore, it fell to me not only to attempt to read his mind but also to close a portion of my own to him.

Patch by patch I pieced his thoughts together like a jig-saw puzzle.

He was studying the destruction of matter, seeking a method of completely annihilating it. Having discovered a means of creating matter, he was now swinging to the opposite extreme and experimenting with its destruction.

I did not share my secret with Scott, for I feared that he would unconsciously betray it to the Creator.

As days passed, I learned that the Creator was considering the destruction of matter without the use of heat. I knew that, even on Earth, it was generally conceded a temperature of 4,000,000,000,000 degrees Fahrenheit serve to absolutely annihilate matter. I had believed the Creator had found some manner in which he could control such an excessive temperature. But to attempt to destroy matter with no heat at all—! I believe that it was not until then that I

fully realized the great chasm of intelligence that lay between myself and this creature of light.

I have no idea how long we remained in the universe of the Creator before Scott announced that the machine was ready except for a few tests. Time had the illusive quality in this strange place of slithering along without noticeably passing. Although I did not think of it at the time, I cannot recollect now that the Creator employed any means of measuring time. Perhaps time, so far as he was concerned, had become an unnecessary equation. Perhaps he was eternal and time held no significance for him in his eternity.

The elephant-men and the walking-stick-man had already completed their machines, but they had not left. They seemed to be waiting for us. Was it a gesture of respect? We did not know at the time. We never learned.

While Scott made the final tests of our machine I walked into the laboratory. The Creator was at work at his accustomed place. Since our arrival he had paid little attention to us. Now that we were about to leave he made no expression of regret, no sign of farewell.

I approached him, wondering if I should bid him farewell. I pondered for an instant. I had grown to respect him. I wanted to say goodbye. And yet—

Then I caught the faintest of his thoughts and I stiffened. Instantly and unconsciously my mind thrust out probing fingers and grasped the predominant idea in the Creator's mind.

"Destroy the mass of created matter—the universe which is mine—created by me—create matter—destroy it. It is a laboratory product. Test my destructive—"

"Why, you damn murderer," I screamed, and threw myself at him.

Light fingers flicked out at me, whipped around my body, snapped me into the air and heaved me across the laboratory. I struck on the smooth floor and skidded across it to bring up with a crash against the wall.

I shook my head to clear it and struggled to my feet. We must fight the Creator! Must save the universe! Save it from destruction by the creature who had created it!

I came to my feet with my muscles bunched, crouched in a fighting posture.

But the Creator had not moved. He stood in the same position and a rod of purple light extended between him and the queer machine of the walking-stick man. The rod of light seemed to hold him there, exactly as if it were a spear which had been thrust into him. Beside the machine stood the walking-stick-man, his hand on the lever, a mad glare in his eyes.

Scott was slapping the gangling fellow on his slender back.

“You’ve got the goods, old man,” he was shouting. “That’s one trick old frozen face didn’t find out from you.”

A thunderous tumult beat through my head. The machine of the walking-stick-man was not a transmission machine at all. It was a weapon, a terrible weapon, which could freeze the Creator into rigid lines.

Weird colors flowed through the Creator. Dead silence lay over the room. The machine of the walking-stick-man was silent, with no noise to hint of the great power it must have been developing. The purple rod did not waver. It was just a rigid rod of purple which had struck and stiffened the Creator in his tracks.

I screamed at Scott.

“Quick! The universe! He is going to destroy it!”

Scott leaped forward. Together we raced toward the table where the mass of created matter lay in its receptacle. Behind us padded the elephant-men.

As we reached the table, I felt a sinuous trunk wrap about me. With a flip I was hurled to the table top. It was but a step to the dish containing the universe. I snatched it up, dish and all, and handed it down to Scott. I let myself over the table edge, hung by my hands for an instant, and dropped. I raced after the others toward the workshop.

As we gained the room, the walking-stick-man made an adjustment on his machine. The purple rod faded away. The Creator, a towering cone of light, tottered for a moment and then glided swiftly for the doorway.

Instantly a sheet of purple radiance filled the opening. The Creator struck against it and was hurled back.

The radiance was swiftly arching overhead and curving beneath us, cutting through the floor, walls, and ceiling.

“He’s enclosing us in a globe of that stuff,” cried Scott. “It must be an energy screen of some sort. I can’t imagine what it is. Can you?”

“I don’t care what it is, so long as it works,” I panted.

Through the steady purple light I could see the Creator. Repeatedly he hurled himself against the screen and each time he was hurled back.

“We’re moving,” announced Scott.

The great purple globe was moving upward, carrying in its interior we five universe-men, our machines, and fragments of the room in which we but recently had stood. It was cutting through the building like the flame of a torch through soft steel. We burst free of the building into the brilliant blue sunlight of that weird world.

Beneath us lay the building, a marvel of outre architecture, but with a great circular shaft cut through it, the path of the purple globe. All about the building lay a forest of red and yellow vegetation,

shaped as no vegetation of the Earth is shaped, bent into hundreds of strange and alien forms.

Swiftly the globe sprang upward to hang in the air some distance above the building. As far as eye could see stretched the painted forest. The laboratory we had just quitted was the only sign of habitation. No roads, no lakes, no rivers, no distant mountaintop—nothing relieved the level plain of red and yellow which stretched away to faint horizons.

Was the Creator, I wondered, the sole denizen of this land? Was he the last survivor of a mystic race? Had there ever been a race at all? Might not the Creator be a laboratory product, even as the things he created were laboratory products? But if so, who or what had set to work the agents which resulted in the uncanny cone of energy?

My reflections were cut short as the walking-stick-man reached out his skinny hand for the mass of matter which Scott still held. As I watched him breathlessly, he laid it gently on a part of the floor which still remained in the globe and pulled a sliding rod from the side of the machine. A faint purple radiance sprang from the point of the rod, bathing the universe. The radiant purple surrounded the mass, grew thicker and thicker, seeming to congeal into layer after layer until the mass of matter lay sealed in a thick shell of the queer stuff. When I touched it, it did not appear to be hard or brittle. It was smooth and slimy to the touch, but I could not dent it with my fingers.

"He's building up the shell of the globe in just the same way," Scott said. "The machine seems to be projecting that purple stuff to the outside of the shell, where it is congealed into layers."

I noted that what my friend said was true. The shell of the globe had taken on a thickness that could be perceived, although the increased thickness did not seem to interfere with our vision.

Looking down at the laboratory, I could see some strange mechanism mounted on the roof of the building. Beside the massive mechanism stood the Creator.

"Maybe it's a weapon of some sort," suggested Scott.

Hardly had he spoken when a huge column of crimson light leaped forth from the machine. I threw up my hands before my eyes to protect them from the glare of the fiery column. For an instant the globe was bathed in the red glow, then a huge globule of red collected on its surface and leaped away, straight for the laboratory, leaving a trail of crimson behind.

The globe trembled to the force of the explosion as the ball of light struck. Where the laboratory had stood yawned a great hole, blasted to the primal rock beneath. The vegetation for great distances on every side was sifting ash. The Creator was no more! The colorful world beneath stretched empty to the horizon. The men of the

universe had proven to be stronger than their Creator!

"If there's any more Creators around these parts," said Scott, smiling feebly, "they won't dare to train another gun on this thing in the next million years. It gives them exactly what was meant for the other fellow; it crams their poison right down their own throats. Pete, that mass of matter, whether or not it is the universe, is saved. All hell couldn't get at it here."

The walking-stick-man, his mummy-like face impassive as ever, locked the controls of the machine. It was, I saw, still operating, was still building up the shell of the globe. Second by second the globe was adding to its fortress - light strength. My mind reeled as I thought of it continuing thus throughout eternity.

The elephant-men were climbing into their machine.

Scott smiled wanly.

"The play is over," he said. "The curtain is down. It's time for us to go."

He stepped to the side of the walking-stick-man.

"I wish you would use our machine." he said, evidently forgetting our friend could understand no word he spoke. "You threw away your chance back there when you built this contraption instead of a transmitter. Our machine will take you wherever you wish to go."

He pointed to the machine and to the universe, then tapped his head. With the strange being at his side, he walked to our machine, pointed out the controls, explained its use in pantomime.

"I don't know if he understands," said Scott, "but I did the best I could."

As I walked past the walking-stick-man to step into the time-power machine, I believe I detected a faint flicker of a smile on his face. Of that, however, I can never be sure.

CHAPTER SIX
Marooned in Time

I know how the mistake was made. I was excited when I stepped into the machine. My mind was filled with the many strange happenings I had just witnessed. I thought along space directional lines, *but I forgot to reckon the factor of time.*

I thought of the Earth, but I did not consider time. I willed myself to be back on Earth, but I forgot to will myself in any particular time era. Consequently when Scott shoved over the lever, I was shot to Earth, but the time element was confused.

I realize that life in the super-universe of the Creator, being billions of times larger than life upon the Earth, was correspondingly slower. Every second in the super-universe was equal to years of Earth-time. My life in the Creator's universe had equaled millions of years of terrene existence.

I believe that my body was projected along a straight line and not along the curve which would have been necessary to place me back in the twentieth century.

This is theory, of course. There might have been some fault in the machine. The purple globe might have exerted some influence to distort our calculations.

Be that as it may, I reached a dying planet. It has been given to me, a man of the twentieth century, to live out the last years of my life on my home planet some millions of years later than the date of my birth. I, a resident of a comparatively young dynasty in the history of the Earth, now am tribal chieftain and demi-god of the last race, a race that is dying even as the planet is dying.

As I sit before my cave or huddle with the rest of my clan around a feeble fire, I often wonder if Scott Marston was returned to Earth in his proper time. Or is he, too, a castaway in some strange time? Does he still live? Did he ever reach the Earth? I often feel that he may even now be searching through the vast corridors of time and the deserts of space for me, his one-time partner in the wildest venture ever attempted by man.

And often, too, I wonder if the walking-stick-man used our time-power machine to return to his native planet. Or is he a prisoner in his own trap, caught within the scope of the great purple globe? And I wonder how large the globe has grown to be.

I realize now that our effort to save the universe was unnecessary so far as the Earth was concerned, for the Earth, moving at its greater time-speed, would already have plunged into extinction in the flaming

furnace of the sun before the Creator could have carried out his destructive plans.

But what of those other worlds? What of those other planets which must surely swim around strange suns in the gulf of space? What of the planets and races yet unborn? What of the populations that may exist on the solar systems of island universes far removed from our own?

They are saved, saved for all time; for the purple globe will guard the handiwork of the Creator through eternity.

The Spaceman's Van Gogh

This story was originally published in the March 1956 issue of Science Fiction Stories*, and I believe it's the same one that Clifford D. Simak wrote in late 1953 and early 1954, using the title "Grail," which was rejected by several magazines before editor Robert A. W. Lowndes purchased it in June 1955. Although there is no record as to when Cliff's title was changed, or who made that change, the timing is right—and so is the subject matter of the story, for this is a story about a religious quest.*

Cliff Simak's writings touched on the subjects of religion and faith quite often. This may be the most enigmatic of those references, and the least caustic of Cliff's comments on religion.

—dww

The planet was so unimportant and so far out toward the rim that it didn't have a name, but just a code and number as a key to its position. The village had a name, but one that was impossible for a human to pronounce correctly.

It cost a lot to get there. Well, not to get there, exactly, for all one did was *polt* there; but it cost a hunk of cash to have the co-ordinates set up for the *polting*. Because the planet was so far away, the computer had to do a top-notch job, correct to seven decimal points. Otherwise one took the chance of materializing a million miles off destination, in the depths of space; or if you hit the planet, a thousand or so miles up; or worse yet, a couple hundred underneath the surface. Any one of which would be highly inconvenient, if not positively fatal.

There was no reason in the universe for anyone to go there—except Anson Lathrop. Lathrop had to go there because it was the place where Reuben Clay had died.

So he paid out a pocketful of cash to get himself indoctrinated to the planet's mores and speech, and a bucketful of cash to get his *polting* plotted—a two-way job, to get both there and back.

He arrived there just about midday, not at the village exactly, for even seven decimal points weren't good enough to land him squarely in it—but not more than twenty miles away, as it turned out, and no more than twelve feet off the ground.

He picked himself up and dusted himself off and was thankful for the knapsack that he wore, for he had landed on it and been cushioned from the fall.

The planet, or what he could see of it, was a dismal place. It was

a cloudy day and he had trouble making out, so colorless was the land, where the horizon ended and the sky began. The ground was flat, a great plain unrelieved by trees or ridge, and covered here and there by patches of low brush.

He had landed near a path and in this he considered himself lucky, for he remembered from his indoctrination that the planet had no roads and not too many paths.

He hoisted his knapsack firmly into place and started down the path. In a mile or so he came to a signpost, badly weather-beaten, and while he wasn't too sure of the symbols, it seemed to indicate he was headed in the wrong direction. So he turned back, hoping fervently he had read the sign correctly.

He arrived at the village just as dusk was setting in, after a lonely hike during which he met no one except a strange and rather ferocious animal which sat erect to watch him pass, whistling at him all the while as if it were astounded at him.

Nor did he see much more when he reached the village.

The village, as he had known it would, resembled nothing quite so much as one of the prairie dog towns which one could see in the western part of North America, back on his native Earth.

At the edge of the village he encountered plots of cultivated ground with strange crops growing in them; and working among some of these plots in the gathering darkness were little gnome-like figures. When he stopped and called to them, they merely stared at him for a moment and then went back to work.

He walked down the village's single street, which was little more than a well-travelled path, and tried to make some sense out of the entrances to the burrows, each of which was backed by a tumulus of the ground dug up in its excavation. Each mound looked almost exactly like every other mound and no burrow mouth seemed to have anything to distinguish it from any of the others.

Before some of the burrows tiny gnome-like figures played—children, he supposed—but at his approach they scuttled rapidly inside and did not reappear.

He travelled the entire length of the street; and standing there, he saw what he took to be a somewhat larger mound, some little distance off, surmounted by what appeared to be some sort of rude monument, a stubby spire that pointed upward like an accusing finger aimed toward the sky.

And that was a bit surprising, for there had been no mention in his indoctrination—of monuments or of religious structures. Although, he realized, his indoctrination would be necessarily skimpy for a place like this; there was not a great deal known of the planet or its people.

Still, it might not be unreasonable to suppose that these gnomes

might possess religion; here and there one still found patches of it. Sometimes it would be indigenous to the planet, and in other cases it would be survival transplantations from the planet Earth or from one of the other several systems where great religions once had flourished.

He turned around and went back down the street again and came to a halt in the middle of the village. No one came out to meet him, so he sat down in the middle of the path and waited. He took a lunch out of his knapsack, ate it, and drank water out of the vacuum bottle that he carried, and wondered why Reuben Clay had picked this dismal place in which to spend his final days.

Not that it would be out of keeping with the man. It was a humble place and Clay had been a humble man, known as the "Spaceman's Van Gogh" at one time. He had lived within himself rather than with the universe which surrounded him. He had not sought glory or acclaim, although he could have claimed them both—at times, indeed, it appeared that he might be running from them. Throughout his entire life there had been the sense of a man who hid away. Of a man who ran from something, or a man who ran after something—a seeking, searching man who never quite caught up with the thing he sought for. Lathrop shook his head. It was hard to know which sort Clay had been—a hunted man or hunter. If hunted, what had it been he feared? And if a hunter, what could it be he sought?

Lathrop heard a light scuffing in the path and turned his head to see that one of the gnome-like creatures was approaching him. The gnome was old, he saw. Its fur was gray and grizzled and when it came closer he saw the other marks of age upon it—the rheumy eyes, the wrinkled skin, the cragged bushiness of its eyebrows, the cramped stiffness of its hands.

It stopped and spoke to him and he puzzled out the language.

"Good seeing to you, sir." Not "sir," of course, but the nearest translation one could make.

"Good hearing," Lathrop said ceremoniously.

"Good sleeping."

"Good eating," Lathrop said.

Finally they both ran out of "goods."

The gnome stood in the path and had another long look at him. Then: "You are like the other one."

"Clay," said Lathrop.

"Younger," said the gnome.

"Younger," Lathrop admitted. "Not much younger."

"Just right," said the gnome, meaning it to be a diplomatic compliment.

"Thank you."

"Not sick."

"Healthy," Lathrop said.

"Clay was sick. Clay …" Not "died." More like "discontinued" or possibly "ended," but the meaning was clear.

"I know that. I came to talk about him."

"Lived with us," said the gnome. "He (die?) with us."

How long ago? How did you ask how long? There was, Lathrop realized with something of a shock, no gnome-words for duration or measurement of time. A past, present and future tense, of course, but no word for measurement of either time or space.

"You …" There was no word for *buried.* No word for *grave.*

"You planted him?" asked Lathrop.

He sensed the horror that his question raised. "We … him."

Ate him? Lathrop wondered. Some of the ancient tribes of Earth and on other planets, too, ate their dead, thereby conferring tender honors on them.

But it was not eat.

Burned? Scaffolded? Exposed?

No, it was none of those.

"We … him," the gnome insisted. "It was his wish. We loved him. We could do no less."

Lathrop bowed gratefully. "I am honored that you did."

That seemed to mollify the gnome.

"He was a harmless one," said the gnome. Not exactly "harmless." Kind, perhaps. Uncruel. With certain connotations of soft-wittedness. Which was natural, of course, for in his nonconformity through lack of understanding, any alien must appear slightly soft-witted to another people.

As if he might have known what Lathrop was thinking, the gnome said, "We did not understand him. He had what he called a *brushandpaints.* He made streaks with them."

Streaks?

… *Brushandpaints?* Sure, brush and paints.

Streaks? Of course. For the people of this planet were colorblind. To them Clay's painting would be streaks.

"He did that here?"

"Yes. It here."

"I wonder. Might I see it?"

"Certainly," said the gnome. "If you follow me."

They crossed the street and approached a burrow's mouth. Stooping, Lathrop followed down the tunnel. Ten or twelve feet down it became a room, a sort of earthen cave.

There was a light of a sort. Not too good a light, a soft, dim light that came from little heaps of glowing material piled in crude clay dishes placed about the burrow.

Foxfire, thought Lathrop. The phosphorescent light of rotting wood.

"There," said the gnome.

The painting leaned against one wall of the burrow, an alien square of color in this outlandish place. Under ordinary circumstances, the faint foxfire light would have been too feeble for one to see the painting, but the brush strokes on the canvas seemed to have a faint light of their own, so that the colors stood out like another world glimpsed through a window beyond the foxfire dimness. As Lathrop looked at the propped-up square, the glowing quality seemed to become more pronounced, until the picture was quite clear in all its unfinished detail—and it was not a glow, Lathrop thought; it was a *shiningness.*

And it was Clay. The painting, unfinished as it was, could not be mistaken. Even if one had not known that Clay had spent the last days of his life within this village, he still would have known that the work was Clay's. The clean outline was there, the authority of craftsmanship combined with the restrained quality, the masterly understatement, the careful detail and the keen sharp color. But there was something else as well—a certain happiness, a humble happiness that had no hint of triumph.

"He did not finish it," said Lathrop. "He did not have the … (there was no word for time). He (discontinued) before he finished it."

"His *brushandpaints* discontinued. He sat and looked at it."

So that was it. That was how it happened. Clay's paints had given out and there had been no place, no way—perhaps no time—in which he could have gotten more.

So Reuben Clay had sat in this burrow and looked at his last painting, knowing it was the last painting he would ever do, propped there against the wall, and had known the hopelessness of ever finishing the great canvas he had started. Although more than likely Clay had never thought of it as great. His paintings, for him, had never been more than an expression of himself. To him they had been something that lay inside himself, waiting to be transferred into some expression that the universe could see, a sort of artistic communication from Clay to all his fellow creatures.

"Rest yourself," said the gnome. "You are tired."

"Thanks," said Lathrop.

He sat down on the hard-packed floor, with his back against the wall, opposite the painting.

"You knew him," said the gnome.

Lathrop shook his head.

"But you came seeking him."

"I sought word of him."

How could one, he wondered, explain to the little gnome what he sought in Clay, or why he'd tracked him down when all the universe forgot? How could one explain to these people, who were color-blind and more than likely had no conception of what a painting was—how could one explain the greatness that was Clay's? The technique that lived within his hands, the clean, quick sense of color, the almost unworldly ability to see a certain thing exactly as it was.

To see the truth and to reproduce that truth—not as a single facet of the truth, but the entire truth in its right perspective and its precise color, and with its meaning and its mood pinpointed so precisely that one need but look to know.

That may have been why I sought him, thought Lathrop. That may be why I've spent twenty Earth years and a barrel of money to learn all the facts of him. The monograph I some day will write on him is no more than a faint attempt to rationalize my search for facts —the logic that is needed to justify a thing. But it was the truth, thought Lathrop. That's the final answer of what I sought in Clay—the truth that lay in him and in his painting. Because I, too, at one time worked in truth.

"It is magic," said the gnome, staring at the painting.

"Of a sort," said Lathrop. And that probably had been why, at first, they had accepted Clay, in the expectation that some of his magic might rub off on them. But not entirely, perhaps; certainly not toward the end. For Clay was not the sort of simple, unassuming man these simple creatures would respect and love.

They'd let him live among them, more than likely finally as one of them, probably without the thought of payment for his living space and food. He may have worked a little in the fields and he may have puttered up things, but he would have been essentially their guest, for no alien creature could fit himself economically into such a simple culture.

They had helped him through his final days and watched him in his dying and when he had finally died they'd done to him a certain act of high respect and honor.

What was that word again? He could not remember it. The indoctrination had been inadequate; there were word gaps and blank spaces and blind spots and that was wholly understandable in a place like this.

He saw the gnome was waiting for him to explain the magic, to explain it better than Clay had been able to explain it. Or maybe Clay had not attempted to explain, for they might not have asked him.

The gnome waited and hoped and that was all, for he could not ask. You do not ask another race about the details of their magic.

"It is a … (no word for representation, no word for picture) …

place that Clay saw. He tried to bring it back to life. He tried to tell you and I what he had seen. He tried to make us see it, too."

"Magic," said the gnome.

Lathrop gave up. It was impossible. To the gnome it was simple magic. So be it—simple magic.

It was a valley with a brook that gurgled somberly and with massive trees, and a deep wash of light that was more than sunlight lay over all of it. There was no living creature in it and that was typical, for Clay was a landscape artist without the need of people or of other creatures.

A happy place, thought Lathrop, but a solemn happiness. A place to run and laugh, but not to run too swiftly nor to laugh too loudly, for there was a lordly reverence implicit in the composition.

"He saw many places," Lathrop told the gnome. "He put many places on a (no word for canvas or board or plane) … on a flat like that. Many different planets. He tried to catch the… (no word for spirit) … the way that each planet looked."

"Magic," said the gnome. "His was powerful magic."

The gnome moved to the far wall of the room and poked up a peat fire in a primitive stove fashioned out of mud. "You are hungry," said the gnome.

"I ate."

"You must eat with us. The others will be coming. It is too dark to work."

"I will eat with you," said Lathrop.

For he must break the bread with them. He must be one of them if he were to carry out his mission. Perhaps not one of them as Clay had been one of them, but at least accepted. No matter what horrendous and disgusting thing should comprise the menu, he must eat with them.

But it was more than likely that the food would not be too bad. Roots and vegetables, for they had gardens. Pickled insects, maybe, and perhaps some alcoholic concoction he'd have to be a little careful with.

But no matter what it was, he would have to eat with them and sleep with them and be as friendly and as thoughtful as Clay had been thoughtful and friendly.

For they'd have things to tell him, data that he'd given up all hope of getting, the story of the final days of Reuben Clay. Perhaps even some clue to the mystifying "lost years," the years when Clay had dropped completely out of sight.

He sat quietly, thinking of how the trail had come to an end, out near the edge of the galaxy, not too many light-years from this very place. For year on absorbing year he had followed Clay's trail from

star to star, gathering data on the man, talking with those who'd known him, tracking down one by one the paintings he had made. And then the trail had ended. Clay had left a certain planet and no one knew where he'd gone; for years Lathrop had searched for some hint to where he'd gone, and had been close to giving up when he finally had found evidence that Clay had come to this place to die. But the evidence had strongly indicated that he had not come here directly from where the trail stopped, but had spent several years at some other place. So there was still a gap in the story that he followed —a gap of lost years, how many years there was no way of knowing.

Perhaps here, in this village, he might get a clue to where Clay had spent those years. But, he told himself, it could be no more than a clue. It could not be specific, for these little creatures had no concept of time or otherwhere.

More than likely the painting here in this burrow was in itself a clue. More than likely it was a painting of that unknown place Clay had visited before coming here to die. But if that were so, thought Lathrop, it was a slender hope, for one might spend three lifetimes—or more—combing planet after planet in the vain hope recognizing the scene Clay had spread upon the canvas.

He watched the gnome busy at the stove, and there was no sound except the lonely whining of the wind in the chimney and at the tunnel's mouth. Lonely wind and empty moor and the little villages of heaped earth, here at the far edge of the galaxy, out in the rim of the mighty wheel of suns. How much do we know of it, he thought, this thing we call our galaxy, this blob of matter hurled out into the gulf of space by some mighty Fist? We do not know the beginning of it nor the end of it nor the reason for its being; we are blind creatures groping in the darkness for realities and the few realities we find we know as a blind man knows the things within his room, knowing them by the sense of touch alone. For in the larger sense we all are as blind as he—all of us together, all the creatures living in the galaxy. And presumptuous and precocious despite our stumbling blindness, for before we know the galaxy we must know ourselves.

We do not understand ourselves, have no idea of the purpose of us. We have tried devices to explain ourselves, materialistic devices and spiritualistic devices and the application of pure logic, which was far from pure. And we have fooled ourselves, thought Lathrop. That is mostly what we've done. We have laughed at things we do not understand, substituting laughter for knowledge, using laughter as a shield against our ignorance, as a drug to still our sense of panic. Once we sought comfort in mysticism, fighting tooth and nail against the explanation of the mysticism, for only so long as it remained mysticism and unexplained could it comfort us. We once subscribed to

faith and fought to keep the faith from becoming fact, because in our twisted thinking faith was stronger than the fact.

And are we any better now, he wondered, for having banished faith and mysticism, sending the old faiths and the old religions scurrying into hiding places against the snickers of a galaxy that believes in logic and pins its hope on nothing less than fact. A step, he thought—it is but a step, this advancement to the logic and the fact, this fetish for explaining. Some day, far distant, we may find another fact that will allow us to keep the logic and the fact, but will supply once again the comfort that we lost with faith.

The gnome had started cooking and it had a good smell to it. Almost an Earth smell. Maybe, after all, the eating would not be as bad as he had feared.

"You like Clay?" the gnome asked.

"Liked him. Sure, I liked him."

"No. No. You do like he? You make the streaks like he?"

Lathrop shook his head. "I do nothing now. I am (how did you say retired?) … My work is ended. Now I play (play, because there was no other word)."

"Play?"

"I work no more. I do now as I please. I learn of Clay's life and I (no word for write) … I tell his life in streaks. Not those kind of streaks. Not the kind of streaks he made. A different kind of streaks."

When he had sat down he'd put his knapsack beside him. Now he drew it to his lap and opened it. He took out the pad of paper and a pencil. "This kind of steaks," he said.

The gnome crossed the room to stand beside him.

Lathrop wrote on his pad: *I was a whitherer. I used facts and logic to learn whither are we going. I was a seeker after truth.*

"Those kind of streaks," he said. "I have made many streaks of Clay's life."

"Magic," said the gnome.

It was all down, thought Lathrop, all that he had learned of Clay. All but the missing years. All down in page after page of notes, waiting for the writing. Notes telling the strange story of a strange man who had wandered star to star, painting planet after planet, leaving his paintings strewn across the galaxy. A man who had wandered as if he might be seeking something other than new scenes to put upon his canvases. As if his canvases were no more than a passing whim, no more than a quaint and convenient device to earn the little money that he needed for food and *polting* plots, the money that enabled him to go on to system after system. Making no effort to retain any of his work, selling every bit of it or even, at times, simply walking off and leaving it behind.

Not that his paintings weren't good. They were—startlingly good. They were given honored places in many galleries, or what passed as galleries, on many different planets.

Clay had stayed for long at no place. He had always hurried on. As if there were a purpose or a plot which drove him from star to star.

And the sum total of the wandering, of the driven purpose, had ended here in this very burrow, no more than a hiding place against the wind and weather.

"Why?" asked the gnome. "Why make the streaks of Clay?"

"Why?" said Lathrop. "Why? I do not know!"

But the answer, not only of Clay's wandering, but of his following in Clay's tracks, might be within his grasp. Finally, after all the years of searching, he might find the answer here.

"Why do you streak?"

And how to answer that?

How had Clay answered? For they must have asked him, too. Not how, because you do not ask the how of magic. But why … that was permissible. Not the secret of the magic, but the purpose of it.

"So we may know," said Lathrop, groping for the words, "So all of us may know, you and I and all the others on other stars may know what kind of being (man?) Clay was."

"He was … (kind?). He was one of us. We loved him. That is all we need to know."

"All you may need," said Lathrop. "But not enough for others."

Although there probably would not be many who would read the monograph once he had written it. Only a pitiful few would take the time to read it, or even care to read it.

He thought: Now, finally, I know what I've known all along, but refused to admit I knew; that I'm not doing this for others, but for myself alone. And not for the sake of occupation, not for the sake of keeping busy in retirement, but for some deeper reason and for some greater need. For some factor or some sense, perhaps, that I missed before. For some need I do not even recognize. For some purpose that might astound me if I ever understood it.

The gnome went back to the stove and got on with the meal and Lathrop continued to sit with his back against the wall, realizing now the tiredness that was in him. He'd had a busy day. *Polting* was not difficult, actually seemed easy, but it took a lot out of a man. And, in addition to that, he'd walked twenty miles from his landing place to reach the village.

Polting might be easy, but it had not been easy to come by, for its development had been forced to wait upon the suspension of erroneous belief, had come only with the end of certain superstitions and the false screen of prejudice set up to shield Man against his lack

of knowledge. For if a man did not understand a thing, he called it a silly superstition and let it go at that. The human race could disregard a silly superstition and be quite easy in its mind, but it could not disregard a stubborn fact without a sense of guilt.

Shuffling footsteps came down the tunnel and four gnomes emerged into the burrow. They carried crude gardening tools and these they set against the wall, then stood silently in a row to stare at the man sitting on the floor.

The old gnome said: "It is another one like Clay. He will stay with us."

They moved forward, the four of them, and stood in a semi-circle facing Lathrop. One of them asked the old gnome at the stove: "Will he stay here and die?" And another one said, "He is not close to dying, this one." There was anticipation in them.

"I will not die here," said Lathrop, uneasily.

"We will …," said one of them, repeating that word which told what they had done with Clay when he had died, and he said it almost as if it were a bribe to make the human want to stay and die.

"Perhaps he would not want us to," said another one. "Clay wanted us to do it. He may not feel like Clay."

There was horror in the burrow, a faint, flesh-creeping horror in the words they said and in the way they looked at him with anticipation.

The old gnome went to one corner of the burrow and came back with a bag. He set it down in front of Lathrop and tugged at the string which tied it, while all the others watched. And one could see that they watched with reverence and hope and that the opening of the bag was a great occasion—and that if there could be anything approaching solemnity in their squat bodies, they watched most solemnly.

The string finally came loose and the old gnome tilted the bag and grasped it by its bottom and emptied it upon the earthen floor. There were brushes and many tubes of paint, all but a few squeezed dry and a battered wallet and something else that the old gnome picked up from the floor and handed to the Earthman.

Lathrop stretched out his hand and took it and held it and looked at it and suddenly he knew what they had done to Clay, knew without question that great and final honor.

Laughter gurgled in his throat—not laughter at the humor of it, for there was no humor, but laughter at the twisted values, at the cross-purposes of concepts, at wondering how, and knowing how the gnomes might have arrived at the conclusion which they reached in rendering to Clay the great and final honor.

He could see it even now as it must have happened—how they

worked for days carrying the earth to make the mound he'd seen beyond the village, knowing that the end was nearing for this alien friend of theirs; how they must have searched far for timber in this land of little bushes, and having found it, brought it in upon many bended backs, since they did not know the wheel; and how they fitted it together, fumblingly, perhaps, with wooden pegs and laboriously bored-out holes, for they had no metal and they knew no carpentry.

And they did it all for the love that they bore Clay, and all their labor and their time had been as nothing in the glory of this thing they did so lovingly.

He looked at the crucifix and now it seemed that he understood what had seemed so strange of Clay—the eternal searching, the mad, feverish wandering from one star system to another, even in part, the superb artistry that spoke so clearly of a hidden, half-guessed truth behind the many truths he'd spoken with his brush.

For Clay had been a survival-member of that strange, gentle sect out of Earth's far antiquity; he had been one of those who, in this world of logic and of fact, had clung to the mysticism and the faith. Although for Clay, perhaps, the naked faith alone had not been enough, even as for him, Anson Lathrop, bare facts at times seemed not enough. And that he had never guessed this truth of Clay was easy to explain—one did not fling one's faith into the gigantic snicker of a Logic universe.

For both of them, perhaps, neither fact nor faith could stand alone, but each must have some leavening of the other.

Although that is wrong, Lathrop told himself. I do not need the faith. I worked for years with logic and with fact and that is all one needs. If there is other need, it lies in another as-yet-undiscovered factor; we need not go back to faith.

Strip the faith and the mumbo-jumbo from the fact and you have something you can use. As Man long ago had stripped the disbelief and laughter from the poltergeist and had come up with the principle of *polting,* the fact and principle that moved a man from star to star as easily as in the ancient days he might walk down the street to his favorite bar.

Yet there could be no doubt that for Clay it had not worked that way, that with fact alone he could not have painted as he did, that it took the simple faith and the inner glow of that simple faith to give him the warmth and the dedication to make his paintings what they were.

And it had been the faith that had sent him on his search throughout the galaxy.

Lathrop looked at the painting and saw the simplicity and the dignity, the tenderness and the happiness and the sense of flooding

light.

Exactly the kind of light, thought Lathrop, that had been so crudely drawn in the illustrations of those old books he had studied in his course on Earth's comparative religions. There had been, he remembered, one instructor who'd spent some time on the symbolism of the light.

He dropped the crucifix and put out his hand and picked up some of the twisted tubes of oils.

The painting was unfinished, the gnome had said, because Clay had run out of paint, and there was truth in that, for the tubes were flattened and rolled up hard against the caps and one could see the imprint of the fingers that had applied the pressure to squeeze out the last drop of the precious oils.

He fled across the galaxy, thought Lathrop, *and I tracked him down.*

Even after he was dead I went on and tracked him down, sniffing along the cold trail he had left among the stars. And I tracked him because I loved him, not the man himself—for I did not know nor have any way to know what kind of man he was—but because I saw within his paintings something that all the critics missed. Something that called out to me. Deny it as I may, it may have been the ancient faith calling out to me. The faith that is missing now. The simple faith that long ago was killed by simple logic.

But he knew Clay now, Lathrop told himself. He knew him by the virtue of the tiny crucifix and by the symbol of the last great canvas and by the crude actuality of the mound that stood at the village end on this third rate planet.

And he knew why it had to be a third rate planet.

For there must be humility—even as in faith there had been humility, as there had never been in logic.

Lathrop could shut his eyes and see it—the somber clouds and the vast dreariness of the wastelands, the moors that swept on to foreverness, and the white figure on the cross and the crowd that stood beneath it, staring up at it, marked for all time by a thing they did not understand, a thing they could not understand, but a thing they had done out of utter kindness for one whose faith had touched them.

"Did he ever tell you," he asked the gnomes, "where he had been? Where he came from? Where he had been just before he came here."

They shook their heads at Lathrop. "He did not tell," they said.

Somewhere, thought Lathrop, where the trees grew like those trees in the painting. Where there was peace and dignity and tenderness—and the light.

Man had stripped the husk of superstition from the poltergeist and had found a kernel in the *polting* principle. Man had done the

same with anti-gravity, and with telepathy, and many other things but he had not tried to strip the husks from faith to find the hidden kernel. For faith did not submit to investigation. Faith stood sufficient to itself and did not admit of fact.

What was faith and what the goal of faith? In the many tongues of ancient Earth, what had been the goal of those who subscribed to faith? Happy hunting ground, valhalla, heaven, the islands of the blest —how much faith, how much could be fact? One would not know unless he lived by faith alone and no being now, or very few, lived entirely by their faith.

But might there not be, in the last great reckoning of galactic life and knowledge, another principle which would prove greater than either faith or fact—a principle as yet unknown, but only to be gained by aeons of intellectual evolution. Had Clay stumbled on that principle, a man who sought far ahead of time, who ran away from evolutionary knowledge and who, by that very virtue, would have grasped no more than a dim impression of the principle-to-come.

Faith had failed because it had been blinded by the shining glory of itself. Could fact as well have failed by the hard glitter of its being?

But abandoning both faith and fact, armed with a greater tool of discernment, might a man not seek and find the eventual glory and the goal for which life had grasped, knowing and unknowing, from the first faint stir of consciousness upon the myriad solar systems?

Lathrop found the tube of white and unscrewed the cap and squeezed the tube and a bit of oil came out, a tiny drop of oil. He held the tube steady in one hand and picked up a brush. Carefully he transferred the color to the brush.

He dropped the tube and walked across the burrow to the painting and squatted down and squinted at it in the feeble light, trying to make out the source of the flood of light.

Up in the left hand corner, just above the horizon, although he couldn't be entirely sure that he was right.

He extended the brush, then drew it back.

Yes, that must be it. A man would stand beneath the massive trees and face toward the light.

Careful now, he thought. Very, very careful. Just a faint suggestion, for it was mere symbolism. Just a hint of color. One stroke perpendicular and a shorter one at right angle, closer to the top.

The brush was awkward in his hand.

It touched the canvas and he pulled it back again.

It was a silly thing, he thought. A silly thing and crazy. And, besides, he couldn't do it. He didn't know how to do it. Even at his lightest touch, it would be crude and wrong. It would be desecration.

He let the brush drop from his fingers and watched it roll along

the floor.

I tried, he said to Clay.

Hunch

Although this story features, at least in passing, a number of elements Clifford Simak would return to, time and again, in his stories—drugs from space, the too rapid development of technology, telepathy—the basis of "Hunch" is its exposition of what Cliff described, in various later works (such as the novel Ring Around the Sun*), as a new sort of human sense, or perhaps power—the sense of hunch—a kind of new instinct arising in humankind to provide protection from a new kind of danger, arising when ordinary intelligence was not enough.*

John W. Campbell Jr., the legendary editor of Astounding Science Fiction*, took less than two weeks to accept this story after Cliff Simak sent it to him; Campbell paid him $150 and published it in the July 1943 issue of his magazine.*

Sadly, this story does not work well; and I have believed for some time that it represents the skeleton of what should have been a longer, better developed, work. I regret that that story never made it into reality.

—dww

Hannibal was daydreaming again and Spencer Chambers wished he'd stop. Chambers, as chairman of the Solar Control Board, had plenty of things to worry about without having his mind cluttered up with the mental pictures Hannibal kept running through his brain. But, Chambers knew, there was nothing he could do about it. Daydreaming was one of Hannibal's habits, and since Chambers needed the spidery little entity, he must put up with it as best he could.

If those mental pictures hadn't been so clear, it wouldn't have been so bad, but since Hannibal was the kind of thing he was they couldn't be anything but clear.

Chambers recognized the place Hannibal was remembering. It wasn't the first time Hannibal had remembered it and this time, as always, it held a haunting tinge of nostalgia. A vast green valley, dotted with red boulders splotched with gray lichens, and on either side of the valley towering mountain peaks that reached spear-point fingers toward a bright-blue sky.

Chambers, seeing the valley exactly as Hannibal saw it, had the uncomfortable feeling that he knew it, too—that in the next instant he could say its name, could give its exact location. He had felt that way before, when the identification of the place, just as now, seemed at his

fingertips. Perhaps it was just an emotional hallucination brought about by Hannibal's frequent thinking of the place, by the roseate longing with which he invested it. Of that, however, Chambers could not be sure. At times he would have sworn the feeling was from his own brain, a feeling of his own, set apart and distinct from Hannibal's daydreams.

At one time that green valley might have been Hannibal's home, although it seemed unlikely. Hannibal had been found in the Asteroid Belt, to this day remained the only one of his species to be discovered. And that valley never could have been in the Asteroids, for the Belt had no green valleys, no blue skies.

Chambers would have liked to question Hannibal, but there was no way to question him—no way to put abstract thoughts into words or into symbols Hannibal might understand. Visual communication, the picturing of actualities, yes—but not an abstract thought. Probably the very idea of direct communication of ideas, in the human sense, was foreign to Hannibal. After months of association with the outlandish little fellow, Chambers was beginning to believe so.

The room was dark except for the pool of light cast upon the desk top by the single lamp. Through the tall windows shone the stars and a silvery sheen that was the rising moon gilding the tops of the pines on the nearby ridge.

But darkness and night meant nothing to either Chambers or Hannibal. For Hannibal could see in the dark, Chambers could not see at all. Spencer Chambers was blind.

And yet, he saw, through the eyes—or, rather, the senses of Hannibal. Saw far plainer and more clearly than if he had seen with his own eyes. For Hannibal saw differently than a man sees—much differently, and better.

That is, except when he was daydreaming.

The daydream faded suddenly and Chambers, brain attuned to Hannibal's sensory vibrations, looked through and beyond the walls of his office into the reception room. A man had entered, was hanging up his coat, chatting with Chambers' secretary.

Chambers' lips compressed into straight, tight lines as he watched. Wrinkles creased his forehead and his analytical brain coldly classified and indexed once again the situation which he faced.

Moses Allen, he knew, was a good man, but in this particular problem he had made little progress—perhaps would make little progress, for it was something to which there seemed, at the moment, no answer.

As Chambers watched Allen stride across the reception room his lips relaxed a bit and he grinned to himself, wondering what Allen would think if he knew he was being spied upon. Moses Allen, head of

the Solar Secret Service, being spied upon!

No one, not even Allen, knew the full extent of Hannibal's powers of sight. There was no reason, Chambers realized, to have kept it secret. It was just one of his eccentricities, he admitted. A little thing from which he gained a small, smug satisfaction—a bit of knowledge that he, a blind man, hugged close to himself.

Inside the office, Allen sat down in a chair in front of Chambers' desk, lit a cigarette.

"What is it this time, chief?" he asked.

Chambers seemed to stare at Allen, his dark glasses like bowls of blackness against his thin, pale face. His voice was crisp, his words clipped short.

"The situation is getting worse, Moses. I'm discontinuing the station on Jupiter."

Allen whistled. "You'd counted a lot on that station."

"I had," Chambers acknowledged. "Under the alien conditions such as exist on that planet I had hoped we might develop a new chemistry, discover a new pharmacopoeia. A drug, perhaps, that would turn the trick. Some new chemical fact or combination. It was just a shot in the dark."

"We've taken a lot of them," said Allen. "We're just about down to a point where we have to play our hunches. We haven't much else left to play."

Chambers went on, almost as if Allen hadn't spoken. "The relief ship to Jupiter came back today. Brought back one man, mind entirely gone. The rest were dead. One of them had cut his throat. The relief men came back too. Refused to stay after what they saw."

Allen grimaced. "Can't say I blame them."

"Those men were perfectly sane when they went out," declared Chambers. "Psychologists gave every one of them high ratings for mental stability. They were selected on that very point, because we realized Jupiter is bad—probably the most alien place in the entire Solar System. But not so bad every one of them would go mad in three short months."

Chambers matched his fingers. "The psychologists agree with me on that point."

Hannibal stirred a little, sharp claws scratching the desk top. Allen reached out a hand and chucked the little creature under the chin. Hannibal swiped angrily at the hand with an armored claw.

"I'm getting desperate, Moses," Chambers said.

"I know," said Allen. "Things getting worse all the time. Bad news from every corner of the Solar System. Communications breaking down. Machines standing idle. Vital installations no good because the men crack up when they try to run them."

They sat in silence. Allen scowling at his cigarette, Chambers stiff and straight behind his desk, almost as if he were sitting on the edge of his chair, waiting for something to happen.

"Situational psychoneurosis." said Allen. "That's what the experts call it. Another sixty-four dollar word for plain insanity. Men walking out on their jobs. Men going berserk. The whole Solar System crumbling because they can't do the jobs they're meant to do."

Chambers spoke sharply. "We can't get anywhere by ranting at it, Moses. We have to find the answer or give up. Give up the dream men held before us. The dream of an integrated Solar System, integrated by men and for men, working smoothly, making the life of the human race a better life."

"You mean," said Allen, slowly, "what have I done about it?"

Chambers nodded. "I had that in mind, yes."

"I have been working on a lot of angles," Allen declared. "Canceling out most of them. Really just one big one left. But you won't find the answer in sabotage. Not that I won't work to find it there. Because, you see, that's my business. But I feel in my bones that this really is on the up and up—would know it was, except for one thing. To solve this problem, we have to find a new factor in the human mind, in human psychology—a new approach to the whole problem itself.

"Geniuses are our trouble. It takes geniuses to run a Solar System. Just ordinary intelligence isn't enough to do the job. And geniuses are screwy. You can't depend on them."

"And yet," said Spencer Chambers, almost angrily, "we must depend on them."

And that, Allen knew, was the truth—the bitter truth.

For years now there had been a breakdown of human efficiency. It had started gradually, a few incidents here, a few there. But it had spread, had progressed almost geometrically; had reached a point now where, unless something could be done about it, the Solar System's economic and industrial fabric would go to pot for lack of men to run it and the power plants and laboratories, the mills, the domed cities, the communication system men had built on all the planets encircling the Sun would crumble into dust.

Men were better trained, better equipped mentally, more brilliant than ever before. Of that there was no question. They had to be. Hundreds of jobs demanded geniuses. And there were geniuses, thousands of them, more than ever before. Trouble was they didn't stay geniuses. They went insane.

There had been evidence of a mass insanity trend as far back as the twentieth century, stemming even then from the greater demands which an increasingly complex, rapidly changing, vastly speeded-up

civilization placed upon the human brain, upon human capabilities and skills. With the development of a scientific age, man suddenly had been called upon to become a mental giant. Man had tried, had in part succeeded. But the pace had been too fast—the work of man had outstripped his brain. Now man was losing out.

Today the world was a world of specialization. To be of economic value, men had to specialize. They had to study harder than ever to fit themselves into their world. College courses were tougher and longer. The very task of educating themselves for a place in their civilization placed upon them a nervous tension that was only intensified when they took over the strenuous, brain-wearing workaday tasks to which they were assigned.

No wonder, Allen told himself, that there came a time when they threw up their hands, walked out, didn't give a damn.

"You've got to find out what's wrong with the bright boys," he said. "You have to find what's in their make-up that makes them unstable. Maybe there's something wrong with their education, with the way it's dished out to them. Maybe—"

"The educators and psychologists are conducting research along those lines," Chambers reminded him, shortly.

"I get it," said Allen. "I'm to stick to my own field. All right, then. I'm going to tell you something that will make you madder than hell."

Chambers sat silent, waiting. Hannibal shifted himself along the desk, edging closer to Allen, almost as if he were listening and didn't want to miss a word.

"It's this Sanctuary business," Allen said. "You've seen the ads—"

He stopped in flustered embarrassment, but Chambers nodded.

"I see them, yes. I read the papers, Moses. I spread them out and Hannibal looks at them and I read them, just as well as you do. You needn't be so sensitive about my blindness."

"Sanctuary has those ads plastered all over the place," said Allen. "In papers, on signboards, everywhere. Sometimes they call themselves a rest home, sometimes a sanitarium. Sometimes they don't even bother to call themselves anything. Just use a lot of white space, with the name 'Sanctuary' in big type. Refined, all of it. Nothing crude. Nothing quackish about it. They've run about all the other mental sanitariums out of business. Nobody thinks of going anywhere but Sanctuary when they go batty now."

"What are you getting at?" snapped Chambers.

"I told you it would make you sore," Allen reminded him. "They've fooled you, just like they've fooled all the rest of us. Let me tell you what I know about them."

Chambers' lips were thin and straight. "Whatever made you investigate them, Moses? Sanctuary is—" He faltered. "Why,

Sanctuary is—"

Allen laughed. "Yes, I know what you mean. Sanctuary is lily-white. Sanctuary is noble. It's a shining haven in a world that's going haywire. Yeah, that's what you think and everyone thinks. I thought so myself. I started looking them up on a hunch. I hated myself. I felt like I ought to go and hide. But I had a hunch, see, and I never pass one up. So I gritted my teeth and went ahead. And I'm convinced that Sanctuary is either the greatest racket the Solar System has ever known or it's tied up with this insanity some way. My best guess is that it's a racket. I can't figure any angles the other way except that maybe they're doing something to drive people nuts just to boost their business and that doesn't add up for a lot of reasons. If it's a racket, I'm wasting my time. There's bigger game to hunt than rackets these days."

He took a deep breath. "First I checked up on Dr. Jan Nichols, he's the fellow that runs it. And he's a nobody, far as I can find out. Certainly not a psychiatrist. Was in the Solar Service at one time. Headed a party making a survey of mineral resources out in the Belt. Had a minor degree in mineralogy. Just that, nothing more, no specialization. An opportunist, I would deduce. Took just enough education to get a job.

"Our records show the whole party dropped out of sight. Listed as lost. All the rest of them still are lost so far as anybody knows.

"I tried to get in touch with Nichols and couldn't do it. There's no way to reach him. No mail service. No radio service. Nothing. Sanctuary is isolated. If you want anything there, you go there personally, yourself."

"I hadn't realized that," said Chambers.

"Neither does anyone else," declared Allen. "No one tries to get in touch with Sanctuary unless they need their services and if they need their services they go there. But you haven't heard the half of it."

Allen lit a cigarette. A clock chimed softly in the room, and Hannibal, leaning out from the desk, took a swipe at Allen, missed him by bare inches.

The Secret Service man leaned back in his chair. "So, since I couldn't get in touch with Nichols, I sent some of my men out to Sanctuary. Six of them, in fact, at different times—"

He looked at Chambers, face grim.

"They didn't come back."

Chambers started slightly. "They didn't come back. You mean—"

"I mean just that. They didn't come back. I sent them out. Then nothing happened. No word from them. No word of them. They simply disappeared. That was three months ago."

"It seems incredible," declared Chambers. "Never for a moment

have we worried about curing or caring for the men who went insane. Sanctuary did that, we thought. Better than anyone else could."

He shot a sudden question. "They do cure them, don't they?"

"Certainly," said Allen. "Certainly, they cure them. I've talked with many they have cured. But those they cure never go back into Solar Service. They are—"

He wrinkled his brow. "It's hard to put into words, chief. They seem to be different people. Their behavior patterns don't check against their former records. They have forgotten most of their former skills and knowledge. They aren't interested in things they were interested in before. They have a funny look in their eyes. They—"

Chambers waved a hand. "You have to realize they would be changed. The treatment might—"

"Yes, I know," interrupted Allen. "Your reaction is just the same as mine was—as everyone else's would be. It's instinctive to protect Sanctuary, to offer apology for it. Because, you see, every last one of us, some day may need to go there. And knowing that it's there, we feel reassured. Maybe we go batty. So what? Sanctuary will fix us up O.K. Won't cost us a cent if we haven't got the money. Even free transportation if we haven't got the fare. It's something to anchor to in this mad world. A sort of faith, even. It's tough to have it knocked from under you."

Chambers shook his head. "I'm almost sorry you started this business, Moses."

Allen rose, smashed out his cigarette in a tray.

"I was afraid you'd be. I hate to drop it now I've gone this far. It may fizzle out, but—"

"No," said Chambers, "don't drop it. We can't afford to drop anything these days. You, yourself, feel almost instinctively, that it will come to nothing, but on the outside chance it may not, you must go ahead."

"There's just one thing more, chief," said Allen. "I've mentioned it before. The people—"

Chambers flipped impatient hands. "I know what you're going to say, Moses. They resent me. They think I've drawn away from them. There have been too many rumors."

"They don't know you're blind," said Allen. "They'd understand if they did know that. Better for them to know the truth than to think all the things they're thinking. I know what they're thinking. It's my business to know."

"Who would follow a blind man?" asked Chambers bitterly. "I'd gain their pity, lose their respect."

"They're baffled," said Allen. "They talk about your illness, say it has changed you, never realizing it left you blind. They even say your

brain is going soft. They wonder about Hannibal, ask why you never are without him. Fantastic tales have grown up about him. Even more fantastic than the truth."

"Moses," said Chambers, sharply, "we will talk no more about this."

He sat stiff and straight in his chair, staring straight ahead, as Allen left.

Mrs. Templefinger's parties always were dull. That was a special privilege she held as society leader of New York's upper crust.

This party was no exception. The amateurish, three-dimensional movies of her trip to the Jovian moons had been bad enough, but the violinist was worse.

Cabot Bond, publisher of the *Morning Spaceways,* fidgeted in his chair, then suddenly relaxed and tried to look at ease as he caught Mrs. Templefinger glaring at him. She might be a snooty old dame, he told himself, and a trial to all her friends with her determined efforts to uphold the dignity of one of the Solar System's greatest families, but it definitely was not policy to vex her. She controlled too many advertising accounts.

Cabot Bond knew about advertising accounts. He lived by them and for them. And he worried about them. He was worrying about one of them now.

The violin wailed to a stop and the guests applauded politely. The violinist bowed condescendingly. Mrs. Templefinger beamed, fingering her famous rope of Asteroid jewels so the gems caught light and gleamed with slow ripples of alien fire.

The man next to Bond leaned close.

"Great story that—about discovering the Rosetta stone of Mars," he said. "Liked the way your paper handled it. Lots of background. Interpretative writing. None of the sensationalism some of the other papers used. And you put it on the front page, too. The *Rocket* stuck it away on an inside page."

Bond wriggled uncomfortably. That particular story he'd just as soon forget. At least he didn't want to talk about it. But the man apparently expected an answer.

"It wasn't a stone," Bond said icily, almost wishing the violin would start up again. "It was a scroll."

"Greatest story of the century," said the man, entirely unabashed. "Why, it will open up all the ancient knowledge of Mars."

The violin shrieked violently as the musician sawed a vicious bow across the strings.

Bond settled back into his chair, returned to his worry once again.

Funny how Sanctuary, Inc. had reacted to that story about the Rosetta scroll of Mars. Almost as if they had been afraid to let it come

before the public eye. Almost, although this seemed ridiculous, as if they might have been afraid of something that might be found in some old Martian record.

Perhaps he had been wrong in refusing their request to play the story down. Some of the other papers, like the *Rocket,* apparently had agreed. Others hadn't, of course, but most of those were sheets which never had carried heavy Sanctuary lineage, didn't stand to lose much. *Spaceways* did carry a lot of lineage. And it worried Bond.

The violin was racing now, a flurry of high-pitched notes, weaving a barbaric, outlandish pattern—a song of outer space, of cold winds on strange planets, of alien lands beneath unknown stars.

Mrs. Templefinger's sudden scream rang through the room, cutting across the shrilling of the music.

"My jewels!" she screamed. "My jewels!"

She had surged to her feet, one hand clutching the slender chain that encircled her throat. The chain on which the Asteroid jewels had been strung.

But now the famous jewels were gone, as if some hand of magic had stripped them from the chain and whisked them into nowhere.

The violinist stood motionless, bow poised, fingers hovering over the strings. A glass tinkled as it slipped from someone's fingers and struck the floor.

"They're gone!" shrieked Mrs. Templefinger. "My jewels are gone!"

The butler padded forward silently.

"Perhaps I should call the police, madam," he offered respectfully.

A strange light came over Mrs. Templefinger's face, a soft and human light that smoothed out the lines around her eyes and suddenly made her soft and gracious instead of a glowering old dowager. For the first time in twenty years, Mrs. Templefinger smiled a gracious smile.

"No, Jacques," she whispered. "Not the police."

Still smiling, she sat down again, nodded to the violinist. The chain fell from her fingers, almost as if she had forgotten the jewels, almost as if a cool half million dollars' worth of jewelry didn't matter.

The violinist swept the bow across the strings again.

Cabot Bond rose and tiptoed softly from the room. Suddenly it had occurred to him there was something he must do—phone his editor, tell him to play down any more stories the wires might carry on the Rosetta scroll of Mars.

Harrison Kemp, head of the Solar Research Bureau on Pluto, straightened from the microscope, expelling his breath slowly.

His voice was husky with excitement. "Johnny, I really believe you've got it! After all these years … after—"

He stopped and stared, a stricken stare.

For Johnny Gardner had not heard him. Was not even looking at him. The man sat hunched on his stool, faint starlight from the laboratory port falling across his face, a face that had suddenly relaxed, hung loose and slack, a tired, wan face with haggard eyes and drooping jowls.

Kemp tried to speak, but his lips were dry and his tongue thick and terror dried up his words before they came. From somewhere back of him came the slow *drip-drip* of precious water. Outside, the black spires of Plutonian granite speared up into the inky, starry sky.

And before the port, the hunched figure of a man whose gaze went out into the alien wilderness, yet did not see the jumbled tangle that was Pluto's surface.

"Johnny!" Kemp whispered, and the whisper frightened him as it seemed to scamper like a frightened rat around the room.

Gardner did not answer, did not move. One hand lay loosely in his lap, the other dangled at his side. One foot slipped off the rung of the stool and, just failing to reach the floor, swung slowly to and fro like a ghastly pendulum.

Kemp took a step forward, reaching out a hand that stopped short of Gardner's shoulder.

There was no use, he knew, of trying to do anything. Johnny Gardner was gone. The hulking body still sat on the stool, but the mind, that keen, clear-cut, knifelike mind, was gone. Gone like a dusty mummy falling in upon itself. One moment a mind that could probe to the very depth of life itself—the next moment a mind that was no more than a darkening cavern filled with the hollow hooting of already half-forgotten knowledge.

Fumbling in the darkness, Kemp found another stool, perched wearily on it. Perched and stared at Gardner, while he felt the nameless horror of an alien planet and an alien happening slowly circle over him, like dark wings beating in the starlight.

A small cone of brilliance hung above the workbench, lighting up the electronic microscope. And under the microscope, Kemp knew, was something that came close to being the raw material, the constituent element of life. Something that he and Johnny Gardner and Victor Findlay had sought—for how many years? To Kemp, sitting there in the darkness, it seemed eternity.

An eternity of research, of compiling notes, of seeming triumph, always followed by the blackest of defeat.

"And," said Harrison Kemp, speaking to himself and the silent room and the madman at the port, "here we are again!"

It would be futile, Kemp knew, to try to pick up where Gardner had left off. For Gardner had worked swiftly, had been forced to work

swiftly, in those last few minutes. Since there had been no time to jot it down, he had tucked away that final crucial data in his brain. Even under the near-zero conditions to which the protoplasmic molecules had been subjected, they still would be unstable. They would have changed now, would have been rendered useless for further observation—would either have become more complex life or no life at all, having lost that tiny spark that set them off from other molecules.

Kemp knew he and Findlay would have to start over again. Johnny's notes would help them to a certain point—up to that point where he had ceased to write them down, had stored them in his brain. From that point onward they would have to go alone, have to feel their way along the path Johnny Gardner had taken, try to duplicate what he had done. For whatever was in Johnny's brain was lost now—lost completely, gone like a whiff of rocket gas hurled into the maw of space.

A door creaked open and Kemp got to his feet, turning slowly to face the man silhouetted against the light from the room beyond.

"Why so quiet?" asked Findlay. "What are you fellows—"

His voice ran down and stopped. He stood rigidly, staring at the star-lighted face of Johnny Gardner.

"It just happened, Vic," said Kemp. "He called me to show me something in the 'scope and while I looked it happened to him. When I looked up again and spoke to him, he was sitting there, just like he is now. He was all right before, just a few seconds before."

"It hits them like that," said Findlay. He stepped into the room, walked close to Kemp. "We should know," he said. "We've seen it happen to enough of them, you and I. Sometimes I have a dream, with you and me the only sane men left in the entire System. Everybody cracking, leaving just the two of us."

"I should have taken your advice," Kemp declared bitterly. "I should have sent him back on the last ship. But he looked all right. He acted O.K. And we needed him. He hung out for a long time. I thought maybe he would last."

"Don't blame yourself, chief," said Findlay. "There was no way for you to know."

"But you knew, Vic! You warned me. You said he'd crack. How did you know? Tell me, how did—"

"Take it easy," cautioned Findlay. "I didn't know. Nothing definite, at least. Just a feeling I had. A hunch, I guess you'd call it."

They stood together, shoulder to shoulder, as if by standing thus they might beat back the sense of doom, the air of utter human futility that seemed to well within themselves.

"It won't always be like this," said Kemp. "Some day we'll be able

to keep men's minds from going haywire. We'll find a way to help the mind keep pace with man's ambitions, to fall in step with progress."

Findlay nodded toward Gardner. "He was on the right track. He took the first long step. Before we even try to study the mind as it should be studied, scientifically, we must know what life is. Before, we've always started in the middle and stumbled back, trying to find the Lord knows what. We can't afford to do that any longer. We have to have a basis, a basic understanding of life to understand ourselves."

Kemp nodded. "You're right, Vic. He took the first long step. And now … now, he goes to Sanctuary."

They helped Johnny Gardner from the stool and across the room. He walked like a blind man, stumblingly, muscles uncertain. His eyes stared straight ahead, as if he were watching something no one else could see.

"Thank heaven," said Findlay, "he went this way. Not like Smith."

Kemp shuddered, remembering. Smith had been violent. He had mouthed obscenities, had screamed and shouted, wrecked the laboratory. They had tried to calm him, to reason with him. When he charged Findlay with a steel bar, Kemp had shot him.

Although even that hadn't been any worse than Lempke. Lempke had committed suicide by walking out of the dome into the almost nonexistent atmosphere of frigid Pluto without benefit of space gear.

Dr. Daniel Monk laid the pencil aside, read once again the laborious lines of translation:

> *This is the story of … who visited the fifth planet from the central sun; not the first to go there, but the first to discover the life that lived thereon, a curious form of life that because of its … had not previously been recognized as life—*

Outside the thin night wind of Mars had risen and was sweeping the city of Sandebar, whining and moaning among the cornices and columns of the museum. Drift sand pecked with tiny fingers against the windows and the brilliant Martian starlight painted frosty squares on the floor as it came tumbling through the casement.

This is the story of—

Dr. Monk frowned at that. The story of whom? Probably, he told himself, he would never know, for the vocabulary made available by the Rosetta scroll did not extend to personal names.

With a wry smile he picked up his pencil again, wrote "John Doe" in the blank. That was as good as any name.

This is the story of John Doe—

But that didn't answer another question. It didn't tell why the life of the fifth planet had not been recognized as life.

The fifth planet, without a doubt, was the planet which in another eon had traveled an orbit between Mars and Jupiter—the planet now represented by the Asteroid Belt, a maelstrom of planetary debris. It would have been the planet, it and the Earth, most accessible to Mars. It was natural the Martians should have gone there. And that they had known the planet before its disruption gave a breath-taking clue to the incredible antiquity of the scroll from which the passage had been translated.

Perhaps, Monk told himself, one of the other scrolls might tell of the actual breakup of the fifth planet, might give a clue or state a cause for its destruction. There were thousands of other scrolls, the loot of years from the ruins of Martian cities. But until this moment they had been voiceless, mute testimony the Martians had possessed a written language, but telling nothing of that language, revealing none of the vast store of information they held.

A curious form of life that because of its—

Because of its what? What form could life take, what trick could it devise to hide its being? Invisibility? Some variant of protective coloration? But one couldn't write "invisibility" into the text as one had written "John Doe".

Perhaps some day, Monk told himself, he might find the answer, might be able to write in that missing word. But not now. Not yet. The Rosetta scroll, for all its importance, still left much to be desired. It necessarily had to leave much to be desired, for it dealt in a language that sprang from a different source than Terrestrial language, developed along alien lines, represented thought processes that could have been—must have been—poles apart from the thoughts of Earth.

All that the Martian language held in common with Earthian language was that both represented thought symbols. That was all; there was very little similarity in the way they went about doing that same thing.

Monk reached out and lifted the heavy metal cylinder from the desk before him. Carefully, almost reverentially, he flipped open the lock that released one end of the cylinder, drew out the heavy, lengthy scroll that had provided the key to the thoughts, the works, the ways of the ancient race of Mars.

He unrolled it slowly, gently, squinting at the faded characters, faint with a million years or more of being buried in the sands of Mars.

A dictionary once—a dictionary again, but in a different way.

Monk wondered what sort of a long-dead personality had penned

that dictionary. Scholar, seeking no more than the ways of truth? Businessman, seeking to facilitate a better lingual understanding, therefore a better commercial understanding, between the race of Mars and the now decadent races of the Jovian moons? Statesmen, trying to bring about a good-neighbor policy?

The Martian, however, whoever he might have been, had not understood that Jovian language too well, for some of the words and idioms didn't check with the Jovian language as Earthmen knew it. Or it might have been that the language itself had changed. Perhaps in that long-gone day when the scroll was written the moon men of Jupiter had not been decadent.

On that point, Monk knew, the Jovians themselves could throw little light. There were ruins, of course, and legends, but the legends were utterly crazy and the ruins held no traditional sentiment for the tribes of Europa or Ganymede. Unlike most peoples, they held no racial memories of a more glorious past, of a forgotten golden age.

It was a roundabout way, a long way, an awkward way to read the language of Mars, Monk reflected. Martian to Jovian to Earthian. But it was better than no way at all.

The clock on the manuscript cabinet chimed briefly, apologetically. Monk glanced at it and started in surprise. Midnight. He had not realized it was that late. Suddenly he knew that he was tired and hungry, needed a drink and smoke.

He rose and walked to a table, found a bottle and glass, poured himself a drink. From somewhere, far in another part of the vast building, came the ghostly sound of a watchman's tread, making his rounds. The sand talked and hissed against the window.

Back at his desk, Monk sipped at his drink, staring at the metallic tube, thinking of the faint scrawlings on the scroll inside.

A Rosetta stone—the Rosetta stone of Mars. Brought in off the desert by a man who might just as easily have passed it by. Uncovered by shifting sand that in the next hour might just as well have covered it again for all eternity.

Monk lifted his glass to the weathered cylinder.

"To destiny," he said, and drank before he realized how silly it sounded.

Or was it silly? Might there not really be such a thing as destiny? An actual force moving to offset the haphazard course of a vagrant universe? Sometimes it seemed so. Sometimes—

Monk emptied the glass, set it on the desk, dug into his pocket for cigarettes. His fingers closed on a small package and he drew it out wonderingly, brow wrinkled. Then, quickly, he remembered. It had been in his mail box that morning. He had meant to open it later, had forgotten it until now.

He examined it curiously. It bore no return address and his own was laboriously printed by hand. He ripped the fastening tapes with his fingernails, unwrapped the paper.

A jewel box! Monk snapped up the lid and stiffened in surprise.

In its bed of rich velvet lay the gleaming roundness of an Asteroid jewel. It glowed softly under the desk lamp, colors flowing and changing within its heart, almost as if the jewel itself might be in motion.

There was no card. Nothing to indicate who had sent the jewel or, more important, why it had been sent. Asteroid jewels, Monk knew, weren't something to be just sent around to anyone for no reason at all. The stone before him, he realized, had a value that ran close to five figures.

Almost fearfully, he lifted the gem between thumb and forefinger, held it to the light and caught his breath in wonder as it blazed with soul-stirring beauty.

With a feeling that approached awe, he replaced it, sat quietly in his chair watching it.

Queer things, the Asteroid jewels, queer in more ways than one.

No one knew just what they were. No Asteroid jewel had ever been analyzed. Spectrographically, they were like nothing science had ever known. They could be broken down chemically, of course, but even then they were impossible of analysis. Something there to analyze, naturally, but with certain baffling characteristics no chemist had yet been able to tie down and catalogue.

Found nowhere else in the Solar System, they were the magic that drove men to lives of bitter privation in the Belt, searching among the debris of a dead planet for that tiny gleam in the jumbled rocks that would spell riches. Most of them, as could be expected, died without ever finding a single jewel; died in one of a vast variety of horrible, lonely ways a man can die among the Asteroids.

Monk found a cigarette and lighted it, listening to the pelting of the sand against the window. But there was a strange sound, too. Something that was not sand tapping on the panes, nor yet the shrill keening of the savage wind that moaned against the building. A faint whining that bore a pattern of melody, the sobbing of music—music that sneaked in and out of the wind blasts until one wondered if it was really there or was just imagination.

Monk sat stiffly, poised, cigarette drooping, ears straining.

It came again, the cry of strings, the breath of lilting cadence, until it was a thing apart from the wind and the patter of the sand.

A violin! Someone playing a violin inside the museum!

Monk leaped to his feet and suddenly the violin screamed in singing agony.

And even as that melodic scream ran full-voiced through the hall outside, a sharp bell of warning clanged inside Monk's brain.

Acting on impulse, his hand shot down and snatched up the Asteroid jewel. Clutching it savagely, he hurled it viciously against the metallic side of the manuscript cabinet.

It flashed for a moment in the light as it exploded into tiny bits of glowing dust. And even as it splashed to shards, it changed—or tried to change. For just a moment it was not a jewel, but something else, a fairylike thing—but a crippled fairy. A fairy with humped back and crooked spine and other curious deformities.

Then there was no twisted fairy, but only jewel dust twinkling on the floor and the sound of running feet far down the corridor.

Monk did not try to give chase to the man outside. Instead, he stood as if frozen, listening to the wind and the sand dance on the window, staring at the sparkle on the floor.

He slowly closed and opened his right hand, trying to remember just how the jewel had felt at the instant he had clutched it. Almost as if it might have been alive, were struggling to get out of his clutches, fighting to attain some end, to carry out some destiny.

His eyes still were upon the floor.

"Now," he said aloud, amazement in his words, "I wonder why I did that?"

Standing in front of Spencer Chambers' desk, Harrison Kemp was assailed by doubt, found that in this moment he could not reconcile himself to the belief he had done the right thing. If he were wrong, he had deserted a post he should have kept. Even if he were right, what good could his action do?

"I remember you very well," he heard Chambers say. "You have been out on Pluto. Life research. Some real achievements in that direction."

"We have failed too often," Kemp told him flatly.

Chambers matched his fingers on the desk in front of him. "We all fail too often," Chambers said. "And yet, some day, some one of us will succeed, and then it will be as if all of us succeeded. We can write off the wasted years."

Kemp stood stiff and straight. "Perhaps you wonder why I'm here."

Chambers smiled a little. "Perhaps I do. And yet, why should I. You have been gone from Earth for a long time. Perhaps you wanted to see the planet once again."

"It wasn't that," Kemp told him. "It's something else. I came because I am about to go insane."

Chambers gasped involuntarily.

"Say that again," he whispered. "Say it slowly. Very slowly."

"You heard me," said Kemp. "I came because I'm going to crack. I came here first. Then I'm going out to Sanctuary. But I thought you'd like to know—well, know, that a man can tell it in advance."

"Yes," said Chambers, "I want to know. But even more than that. I want to know how you can tell."

"I couldn't myself," Kempt told him. "It was Findlay who knew."

"Findlay?"

"A man who worked with me on Pluto. And he didn't really know. What I mean is he had no actual evidence. But he had a hunch."

"A hunch?" asked Spencer Chambers. "Just a hunch? That's all?"

"He's had them before," Kemp declared. "And they're usually right. He had one about Johnny Gardner before Johnny cracked up. Told me I should send him back. I didn't. Johnny cracked."

"Only about Johnny Gardner?"

"No, about other things as well. About ways to go about our research, ways that aren't orthodox. But they usually bring results. And about what will happen the next day or the day after that. Just little inconsequential things. Has a feeling, he says—a feeling for the future."

Chambers stirred uneasily. "You've been thinking about this?" he asked. "Trying to puzzle it out. Trying to explain it."

"Perhaps I have," admitted Kemp, "but not in the way you mean. I'm not crazy yet. May not be tomorrow or next week or even next month. But I've watched myself and I'm pretty sure Findlay was right. Small things that point the way. Things most men would just pass by, never give a second thought. Laugh and say they were growing old or getting clumsy."

"Like what?" asked Chambers.

"Like forgetting things I should know. Elemental facts, even. Having to think before I can tell you what seven times eight equals. Facts that should be second nature. Trying to recall certain laws and fumbling around with them. Having to concentrate too hard upon laboratory technique. Getting it all eventually, even quickly, but with a split-second lag."

Chambers nodded. "I see what you mean. Maybe the psychologists could help—"

"It wouldn't work," declared Kemp. "The lag isn't so great but a man could cover up. And if he knew someone was watching he would cover up. That would be instinctive. When it becomes noticeable to someone other than yourself it's gone too far. It's the brain running down, tiring out, beginning to get fuzzy. The first danger signals."

"That's right," said Chambers. "There is another answer, too. The psychologists, themselves, would go insane."

He lifted his head, appeared to stare at Kemp.

"Why don't you sit down?" he asked.

"Thank you," said Kemp. He sank into a chair. On the desk the spidery little statue moved with a scuttling shamble and Kemp jumped in momentary fright.

Chambers laughed quietly. "That's only Hannibal."

Kemp stared at Hannibal and Hannibal stared back, reached out a tentative claw.

"He likes you," said Chambers in surprise. "You should consider that a compliment, Kemp. Usually he simply ignores people."

Kemp stared stonily at Hannibal, fascinated by him. "How do you know he likes me?"

"I have ways of knowing," Chambers said.

Kemp extended a cautious finger, and for a moment Hannibal's claw closed about it tightly, but gently. Then the grotesque little being drew away, squatted down, became a statue once again.

"What is he?" Kemp asked.

Chambers shook his head. "No one knows. No one can even guess. A strange form of life. You are interested in life, aren't you, Kemp?"

"Naturally," said Kemp. "I've lived with it for years, wondering what it is, trying to find out."

Chambers reached out and picked up Hannibal, put him on his shoulder. Then he lifted a sheaf of papers from his desk, shuffled through them, picked out half a dozen sheets.

"I have something here that should interest you," he said. "You've heard of Dr. Monk."

Kemp nodded. "The man who found the Rosetta scroll of Mars."

"Ever meet him?"

Kemp shook his head.

"Interesting chap," said Chambers. "Buried neck-deep in his beloved Martian manuscripts. Practically slavering in anticipation, but getting just a bit afraid."

He rustled the sheets. "I heard from him last week. Tells me he has found evidence that life, a rather queer form of life, once existed on the fifth planet before it disrupted to form the Asteroids. The Martians wrote that this life was able to encyst itself, live over long periods in suspended animation. Not the mechanically induced suspended animation the human race has tried from time to time, but a natural encystation, a variation of protective coloration."

"Interesting," said Kemp, "but a bit out of my line. It suggests many possibilities. Shows the almost endless flexibility of life as such."

Chambers nodded. "I thought maybe you would have that reaction. It was mine, too, but I'm not an expert on that sort of thing.

Monk hints that life form may still exist. Hints at other things, too. He seemed to be upset when he wrote the letter. Almost as if he were on the verge of a discovery he himself couldn't quite believe. A little frightened at it, even. Not wanting to say too much, you see, until he was absolutely sure."

"Why should something like that upset him?" demanded Kemp. "It's information out of the past. Surely something he finds in those old scrolls can't reach out—"

Chambers lifted his hand. "You haven't heard it all. The Martians were afraid of that life on the fifth planet, Kemp. Deathly afraid of it! So afraid of it they blew up the planet, blasted it, destroyed it, thinking that in doing so they would wipe out the life it bore."

Chambers' face did not change. He did not stir.

"Monk believes they failed," he said.

The room swam in almost frightened silence. Hannibal stirred uneasily on his perch on Chambers' shoulder.

"Can you imagine—" Chambers' voice was almost a whisper. "Can you imagine a fear so great that a race would blow up, destroy another planet to rid themselves of it?"

Kemp shook his head. "It seems rather hard, and yet, given a fear great enough—"

He stopped and shot a sudden look at Chambers. "Why have you bothered to tell me this?" he asked.

"Why, don't you see?" said Chambers smoothly. "Here might be a new kind of life—a different kind of life, developed millions of years ago under another environment. It might have followed a divergent quirk of development, just some tiny, subtle difference that would provide a key."

"I see what you're driving at," said Kemp. "But not me. Findlay is your man. I haven't got the time. I'm living on borrowed sanity. And, to start with, you haven't even got that life. You hardly would know what to look for. An encysted form of life. That could be anything. Send a million men out into the Asteroids to hunt for it and it might take a thousand years.

"The idea is sound, of course. We've followed it in other instances, without success. The moon men of Jupiter were no help. Neither were the Venusians. The Martians, of course, were out of the picture to start with. We don't even know what they were like. Not even a skeleton of them has been found. Maybe the race they were afraid of got them after all—did away with them completely."

Chambers smiled bleakly. "I should have known it was no use."

"I'm sorry," said Kemp. "I have to go to Sanctuary. I've seen some others when it happened to them. Johnny Gardner and Smith and Lempke. It's not going to happen to me that way if I can help it."

Chambers matched his fingers carefully. “You’ve been in the service a long time, Kemp.”

“Ten years,” said Kemp.

“During those ten years you have worked with scarcely a thought of yourself,” said Chambers quietly. “There is no need to be modest. I know your record. You have held a certain ideal. An ideal for a better Solar System, a better human life. You would have given your right arm to have done something that would actually have contributed to the betterment of mankind. Like finding out what life is, for example. You came here now because you thought what you had to tell might help.”

Kemp sat without speaking.

“Isn’t that it?” insisted Chambers.

“Perhaps it is,” admitted Kemp. “I’ve never thought of it in just those words. To me it was a job.”

“Would you do another job?” asked Chambers. “Another job for mankind? Without knowing why you did it? Without asking any questions?”

Kemp leaped to his feet. “I’ve told you I was going to Sanctuary,” he shouted. “I have done what I can, all I can. You can’t ask me to wait around for—”

“You will go to Sanctuary,” said Chambers sharply.

“But this job—”

“When you go to Sanctuary I want you to take Hannibal along.”

Kemp gasped. “Hannibal?”

“Exactly,” said Chambers. “Without asking me why.”

Kemp opened his mouth to speak, closed it.

“Now?” he finally asked.

“Now,” said Chambers. He rose, lifted Hannibal from his shoulder, placed him on Kemp’s shoulder. Kemp felt the sharp claws digging through his clothing, into his flesh, felt one tiny arm pawing at his neck, seeking a hold.

Chambers patted Hannibal on the head. Tears welled out of his sightless eyes behind the large dark glasses.

Sanctuary was a place of beauty, a beauty that gripped one by the throat and held him, as if against a wall.

Once, a few years ago, Kemp realized, it had been a barren hunk of rock, five miles across at most, tumbling through space on an eccentric orbit. No air, no water—nothing but stark stone that glinted dully when the feeble rays of the distant sun chanced to fall across its surface.

But now it was a garden with lacy waterfalls and singing streams arched by feathery trees in whose branches flitted warbling birds. Cleverly concealed lighting held the black of space at bay and invested

the tiny planetoid with a perpetual just-before-dusk, a soft and radiant light that dimmed to purple shadows where the path of flagging ran up the jagged hill crowned by a classic building of shining white plastic.

A garden built by blasting disintegrators that shaped the face of the rock to an architect's blueprint, that gouged deep wells for the gravity apparatus, that chewed the residue of its labor into the basis for the soil in which the trees and other vegetation grew. A garden made livable by machines that manufactured air and water, that screened out the lashing radiations that move through naked space—and yet no less beautiful because it was man and machine-made.

Kemp hesitated beside a deep, still pool just below a stretch of white-sprayed, singing water crossed by a rustic bridge and drank in the scene that ran up the crags before him. A scene that whispered with a silence made up of little sounds. And as he stood there a deep peace fell upon him, a peace he could almost feel, feel it seeping into his brain, wrapping his body—almost as if it were something he could reach and grasp.

It was almost as if he had always lived here, as if he knew and loved this place from long association. The many black years on Pluto were dimmed into a distant memory and it seemed as if a weight had fallen from his shoulders, from the shoulders of his soul.

A bird twittered sleepily and the water splashed on stones. A tiny breeze brought the swishing of the waterfall that feathered down the cliff and a breath of fragrance from some blooming thing. Far off a bell chimed softly, like a liquid note running on the scented air.

Something scurried in the bushes and scuttled up the path and, looking down, Kemp saw Hannibal and at the sight of the grinning face of the little creature his thoughts were jerked back into pattern again.

"Thank goodness you decided to show up," said Kemp. "Where you been? What's the idea of hiding out on me?"

Hannibal grimaced at him.

Well, thought Kemp, that was something less to worry about now. Hannibal was in Sanctuary and technically that carried out the request Chambers had made of him. He remembered the minute of wild panic when, landing at Sanctuary spaceport, he had been unable to find the creature. Search of the tiny one-man ship in which he had come to Sanctuary failed to locate the missing Hannibal, and Kemp had finally given up, convinced that somehow during the past few hours, Chambers' pet had escaped into space, although that had seemed impossible.

"So you hid out somewhere," Kemp said. "Scared they'd find you, maybe, and refuse to let you in. You needn't have worried, though, for

they didn't pay any attention to me or to the ship. Just gave me a parking ticket and pointed out the path."

He stooped and reached for Hannibal, but the creature backed away into the bushes.

"What's the matter with you?" snapped Kemp. "You were chummy enough until just—"

His voice fell off, bewildered. He was talking to nothing. Hannibal was gone.

For a moment Kemp stood on the path, then turned slowly and started up the hill. And as he followed the winding trail that skirted the crags, he felt the peace of the place take hold of him again and it was as if he walked an old remembered way, as if he begrudged every footstep for the beauty that he left behind, but moved on to a newer beauty just ahead.

He met the old man halfway up the hill and stood aside because there was not room for both to keep the path. For some reason the man's brown robe reaching to his ankles and his bare feet padding in the little patches of dust that lay among the stones, even his flowing white beard did not seem strange, but something that fitted in the picture.

"Peace be on you," the old man said, and then stood before him quietly, looking at him out of calm blue eyes.

"I welcome you to Sanctuary," the old man said. "I have something for you."

He thrust his hand into a pocket of his robe and brought out a gleaming stone, held it toward Kemp.

Kemp stared at it.

"For you, my friend," the old man insisted.

Kemp stammered. "But it's … it's an Asteroid jewel."

"It is more than that, Harrison Kemp," declared the oldster. "It is much more than that."

"But even—"

The other spoke smoothly, unhurriedly. "You still react as you did on Earth—out in the old worlds, but here you are in a new world. Here values are different, standards of life are not the same. We do not hate, for one thing. Nor do we question kindness, rather we expect it—and give it. We are not suspicious of motives."

"But this is a sanitarium," Kemp blurted out. "I came here to be treated. Treated for insanity."

A smile flicked at the old man's lips. "You are wondering where you'll find the office and make arrangements for treatment."

"Exactly," said Kemp.

"The treatment," declared the oldster, "already has started. Somewhere along this path you found peace—a greater, deeper peace

than you've ever known before. Don't fight that peace. Don't tell yourself it's wrong for you to feel it. Accept it and hold it close. The insanity of your worlds is a product of your lives, your way of life. We offer you a new way of life. That is our treatment."

Hesitantly, Kemp reached out and took the jewel. "And this is a part of that new way of life?"

The old man nodded. "Another part is a little chapel you will find along the way. Stop there for a moment. Step inside and look at the painting you will find there."

"Just look at a painting?"

"That's right. Just look at it."

"And it will help me?"

"It may."

The old man stepped down the path. "Peace go with you," he said and paced slowly down the hill.

Kemp stared at the jewel in his palm, saw the slow wash of color stir within its heart.

"Stage setting," he told himself, although he didn't say it quite aloud.

A pastoral scene of enchanting beauty, a man who wore a brown robe and a long white beard, the classic white lines of the building on the plateau, the chapel with a painting. Of course a man would find peace here. How could a man help but find peace here? It was designed and built for the purpose—this scene. Just as an architect would design and an engineer would build a spaceship. Only a spaceship was meant to travel across the void, and this place, this garden, was meant to bring peace to troubled men, men with souls so troubled that they were insane.

Kemp stared at a flowering crab-apple tree that clung to the rocks above him, and even as he watched a slight breeze shook the tree and a shower of petals cascaded down toward him. Dimly, Kemp wondered if that tree kept on blooming over and over again. Perhaps it did. Perhaps it never bore an apple, perhaps it just kept on flowering. For its function here in Sanctuary was to flower, not to fruit. Blossoms had more psychological value as a stage setting than apples—therefore, perhaps, the tree kept on blossoming and blossoming.

Peace, of course. But how could they make it stick? How could the men who ran Sanctuary make peace stay with a man? Did the painting or the Asteroid jewel have something to do with it? And could peace alone provide the answer to the twisted brains that came here?

Doubt jabbed at him with tiny spears, doubt and skepticism—the old skepticism he had brought with him from the dusty old worlds,

the frigid old worlds, the bitter old worlds that lay outside the pale of Sanctuary.

And yet doubt, even skepticism, quailed before the beauty of the place, faltered when he remembered the convincing sincerity of the old man in the brown robe, when he remembered those calm blue eyes and the majesty of the long white beard. It was hard to think, Kemp told himself, that all of this could be no more than mere psychological trappings.

He shook his head, bewildered, brushed clinging apple blossoms from his shoulder and resumed his climb, Asteroid jewel still clutched tightly in his hand. The path narrowed until it was scarcely wide enough to walk upon, with the sheer wall on his right knifing up toward the plateau, the precipice to his left dropping abruptly into a little valley where the brook gurgled and laughed beneath the waterfall that loomed just ahead.

At the second turn he came upon the chapel. A little place, it stood close to the path, recessed a little into the wall of rock. The door stood ajar, as if inviting him.

Hesitating for a moment, Kemp stepped into the recess, pushed gently on the door and stepped inside. Stepped inside and halted, frozen by the painting that confronted him. Set in a rocky alcove in the wall, it was lighted by a beam that speared down from the ceiling just above the door.

As if it were a scene one came upon through an open window rather than one caught upon a canvas, the city stood framed within the flare of light—a weird, fantastic city sprawled on some outer world. Bizarre architecture rearing against an outlandish background; towers leaping upward and fading into nothing, showing no clear-cut line where they left off; spidery sky bridges coiling and looping among the spires and domes that somehow were not the way spires and domes should be—the city looked like the impassioned chiselings of some mad sculptor.

And as Kemp stood transfixed before the city in the wall, a bell clanged far above him, one sharp clear note that lanced into his brain and shook him like an angry fist.

Something stirred within his hand, something that came to life and grew and wanted to be free. With a wild exclamation, Kemp jerked his hand in front of him, shaking it to free it of the thing that moved within it—repugnance choking him, an instinctive gesture born in the human race by spiders in dark caves, by crawling things that dropped off jungle leaves and bit.

But it was no spider, no crawling thing. Instead it was a light, a little point of light that slipped from between his fingers and rose and swiftly faded into nothing. And even as it faded, Kemp felt cool fingers

on his jumping nerves, fingers that soothed them and quieted them until he felt peace flow toward him once again, but this time a deeper, calmer, vaster peace that took in all the universe, that left him breathless with the very thought of it.

Claws rustled on the floor behind him and a dark form sailed through the air to land upon his shoulder.

"Hannibal!" yelled the startled Kemp.

But, even as he yelled, Hannibal launched himself into the air again, straight from Kemp's shoulder into empty air, striking viciously at something that was there, something that fought back, but something Kemp could not see at all.

"Hannibal!" Kemp shrieked again, and the shriek was raw and vicious as he realized that his new-found peace had been stripped from him as one might strip a cloak, leaving him naked in the chill of sudden fear.

Hannibal was fighting something, of that there was no doubt. An invisible something that struggled to get free. But Hannibal had a death grip. His savage jaws were closed upon something that had substance, his terrible claws raked at it, tore at it.

Kemp backed away until he felt the stone wall at his back, then stood and stared with unbelieving eyes.

Hannibal was winning out, was dragging the thing in the air down to the ground. As if he were performing slow-motion acrobatics, he twisted and turned in the air, was slowly sinking toward the floor. And never for a moment were those scythelike claws idle. They raked and slashed and tore and the thing that fought them was weakening, dropped faster and faster.

Just before they reached the floor, Hannibal relaxed his grip for a moment, twisted in midair like a cat and pounced again. For a fleeting second Kemp saw the shape of the thing Hannibal held between his jaws, the thing he shook and shook, then cast contemptuously aside—a shimmery, fairy-like thing with dragging wings and a mothlike body. Just a glimpse, that was all.

"Hannibal," gasped Kemp. "Hannibal, what have you done?"

Hannibal stood on bowed legs and stared back at him with eyes in which Kemp saw the smoky shine of triumph. Like a cat might look when it has caught a bird, like a man might look when he kills a mortal enemy.

"It gave me peace," said Kemp. "Whatever it was, it gave me peace. And now—"

He took a slow step forward and Hannibal backed away.

But Kemp stopped as a swift thought struck him.

The Asteroid jewel!

Slowly he lifted his two hands and looked at them and found

them empty. The jewel, he remembered, had been clutched in his right hand and it had been from that hand that the shining thing arose.

He caught his breath, still staring at his hands.

An Asteroid jewel one moment, and the next, when the bell chimed, a spot of glowing light—then nothing. And yet something, for Hannibal had killed something, a thing that had a moth-like body and still could not have been a moth, for a man can see a moth.

Kemp's anger at Hannibal faded and in its place came a subtle fear, a fear that swept his brain and left it chisel-sharp and cold with the almost certain knowledge that here he faced an alien threat, a siren threat, a threat that was a lure.

Chambers had told him about a life that could encyst itself, could live in suspended animation; had voiced a fear that the old Martians, who had tried to sweep that life away, had failed.

Could it be that the Asteroid jewels were the encysted life?

Kemp remembered things about the jewels. They never had been analyzed. They were found nowhere else except upon the Asteroids.

The bell might have been the signal for them to awake, a musical note that broke up the encystation, that returned the sleeping entity to its original form.

Entities that were able to give peace. That could cure the twisted brains of men, probably by some subtle change of outlook, by the introduction of some mental factor that man had never known before.

Kemp remembered, with a sudden surge of longing, a stinging sense of loss, the mental peace that had reached out to him—for a fleeting moment felt a deep and sharp regret that it had been taken from him.

But despite that ability to give peace the Martians had feared them, feared them with a deep and devastating fear—a fear so great they had destroyed a planet to rid the System of them. And the Martians were an old race and a wise race.

If the Martians had feared them, there was at least good grounds to suspect Earthmen should fear them, too.

And as he stood there, the horror of the situation seeped into Kemp's brain. A sanitarium that cured mental cases by the simple process of turning those mental cases over to an alien life which had the power to impose upon the mind its own philosophy, to shape the human mind as it willed it should be shaped. A philosophy that started out with the concept of mental peace and ended—where?

But that was something one couldn't figure out, Kemp knew—something there was no way to figure out. It could lead anywhere. Especially since one had no way of knowing what sort of mental concepts the aliens of the fifth planet might hold. Concepts that might

be good or ill for the human race, but concepts that certainly would not be entirely human.

Clever! So clever that Kemp wondered now why he had not suspected sooner, why he had not smelled a certain rottenness. First the garden to lull one into receptiveness—that odd feeling one had always known this place, making him feel that he was at home so he would put his guard down. Then the painting—meant, undoubtedly, to establish an almost hypnotic state, designed to hold a man transfixed in rapt attention until it was too late to escape the attention of the reawakened life. If, in fact, anyone would have wanted to escape.

That was the insidious part of it—they gave a man what he wanted, what he longed for, something he missed out in the older worlds of struggle and progress. Like a drug—

Claws rattled on the floor.

"Hannibal!" yelled Kemp. But Hannibal didn't stop.

Kemp plunged toward the door, still calling. "Hannibal! Hannibal, come back here!"

Far up the slope there was a rustle in the bushes. A tiny pebble came tapping down the hill.

"Peace be on you," said a familiar voice, and Kemp spun around. The old man with the brown robe and the long white whiskers stood in the narrow path.

"Is there anything wrong?" asked the oldster.

"No," said Kemp. "Not yet. But there's going to be!"

"I do not—"

"Get out of my way," snapped Kemp. "I'm going back!"

The blue eyes were as calm as ever, the words as unhurried. "No one ever goes back, son."

"Gramp," warned Kemp grimly, "if you don't step in here so I can go down the path—"

The old man's hands moved quickly, plunging into the pockets of his robe. Even as Kemp started forward they came out again, tossed something upward and for one breathless instant Kemp saw a dozen or more gleaming Asteroid jewels shimmering in the air, a shower of flashing brilliance.

Bells were clamoring, bells all over the Asteroid, chiming out endlessly that one clear note, time after time, stabbing at Kemp's brain with the clarity of their tones—turning those sparkling jewels into things that would grasp his mind and give him peace and make him something that wasn't quite human.

With a bellow of baffled rage, Kemp charged. He saw the old man's face in front of him, mouth open, those calm eyes now deep pools of hatred, tinged with a touch of fear. Kemp's fist smacked out,

straight into the face, white whiskers and all. The face disappeared and a scream rang out as the oldster toppled off the ledge and plunged toward the rocks below.

Cool fingers touched Kemp's brain, but he plunged on, almost blindly, down the path. The fingers slipped away and others came and for a moment the peace rolled over him once again. With the last dregs of will power he fought it off, screaming like a tortured man, keeping his legs working like pistons. The wind brought the scent of apple blossoms to him and he wanted to stop beside the brook and take off his shoes and know the feel of soft green grass beneath his feet.

But that, one cold corner of his brain told him, was the way they wanted him to feel, the very thing Sanctuary wanted him to do. Staggering, he ran, reeling drunkenly.

He staggered, and as he fell his hand struck something hard and he picked it up. It was a branch, a dead branch fallen from some tree. Grimly, he tested it and found it hard and strong, gripped it in one hand and stumbled down the path.

The club gave him something—some strange psychological advantage—a weapon that he whirled around his head when he screamed at the things that would have seized his mind.

Then there was hard ground beneath his feet—the spaceport. Men ran toward him, yelling at him, and he sprinted forward to meet them, a man that might have been jerked from the caves of Europe half a million years before—a maddened, frothing man with a club in hand, with a savage gleam in his eyes, hair tousled, shirt ripped off.

The club swished and a man slumped to the ground. Another man charged in and the club swished and Harrison Kemp screamed in killing triumph.

The men broke and ran, and Kemp, roaring, chased them down the field.

Somehow he found his ship and spun the lock.

Inside, he shoved the throttle up the rack, forgetting about the niceties of take-off, whipping out into the maw of space with a jerk that almost broke his neck, that gouged deep furrows in the port and crumpled one end of the hangar.

Kemp glanced back just once at the glowing spot that was Sanctuary. After that he kept his face straight ahead. The knotted club still lay beside his chair.

Dr. Daniel Monk ran his finger around the inside of his collar, seemed about to choke.

"But you told me," he stammered. "You sent for me—"

"Yes," agreed Spencer Chambers, "I did tell you I had a Martian. But I haven't got him now. I sent him away."

Monk stared blankly.

"I had need of him elsewhere," Chambers explained.

"I don't understand," Monk declared weakly. "Perhaps he will be coming back."

Chambers shook his head. "I had hoped so, but now I am afraid … afraid—"

"But you don't realize what a Martian would mean to us!" Monk blurted.

"Yes, I do," declared Chambers. "He could read the manuscripts. Much more easily, much more accurately than they can be translated. That was why I sent for you. That, in fact, was how I knew he was a Martian in the first place. He read some of the photostatic copies of the manuscripts you sent me."

Monk straightened in his chair. "He read them! You mean you could talk with him!"

Chambers grinned. "Not exactly talk with him, Monk. That is, he didn't make sounds like you and I do."

The chairman of the Solar Control Board leaned across the desk.

"Look at me," he commanded. "Look closely. Can you see anything wrong?"

Monk stammered. "Why, no. Nothing wrong. Those glasses, but a lot of people wear them."

"I know," said Chambers. "A lot of people wear them for effect. Because they think it's smart. But I don't. I wear mine to hide my eyes."

"Your eyes!" whispered Monk. "You mean there's something—"

"I'm blind," said Chambers. "Very few people know it. I've kept it a careful secret. I haven't wanted the world's pity. I don't want the knowledge I can't see hampering my work. People wouldn't trust me."

Monk started to speak, but his words dribbled into silence.

"Don't feel sorry for me," snapped Chambers. "That's the very thing I've been afraid of. That's why no one knows. I wouldn't have told you except I had to tell to explain about Hannibal."

"Hannibal?"

"Hannibal," said Chambers, "is the Martian. People thought he was my pet. Something I carried around with me because of vanity. Because I wanted something different. Something to catch the headlines. But he was more than a pet. He was a Seeing-eye dog. He was my eyes. With Hannibal around I could see. Better than I could see with my own eyes. Much better."

Monk started forward, then settled back. "You mean Hannibal was telepathic?"

Chambers nodded. "Naturally telepathic. Perhaps it was the way the Martians talked. The only way they could talk. He telepathed

perfect visual images of everything he saw and in my mind I could see as clearly, as perfectly as if I had seen with my own eyes. Better even, for Hannibal had powers of sight a human does not have."

Monk tapped his fingers on the chair arm, staring out of the window at the pines that marched along the hill.

"Hannibal was found out in the Asteroids, wasn't he?" Monk asked suddenly.

"He was," said Chambers. "Until a few days ago I didn't know what he was. No one knew what he was. He was just a thing that saw for me. I tried to talk with him and couldn't. There seemed no way in which to establish a communication of ideas. Almost as if he didn't know there were such things as ideas. He read the newspapers for me. That is, he looked at the page, and in my mind I saw the page and read it. But I was the one that had to do the reading. All Hannibal did was telepath the picture of the paper to me and my mind would do the work. But when I picked up the manuscript photostats it was Hannibal who read. To me they meant nothing—just funny marks. But Hannibal knew. He read them to me. He made me see the things they said. I knew then he was a Martian. No one else but a Martian, or Dr. Monk, could read that stuff."

He matched his fingers carefully. "I've wondered how, since he was a Martian, he got into the Belt. How he could have managed to survive. When we first found him there was no reason to suspect he was a Martian. After all, we didn't know what a Martian was. They left no description of themselves. No paintings, no sculptures."

"The Martians," said Monk, "didn't run to art. They were practical, deadly serious, a race without emotion."

He drummed his fingers along the chair arm again. "There's just one thing. Hannibal was your eyes. You needed him. In such a case I can't imagine why you would have parted with him."

"I needed to see," said Chambers, "in a place I couldn't go."

"You … you. What was that?"

"Exactly what I said. There was a place I had to see. A place I had to know about. For various reasons it was closed to me. I could not, dare not, go there. So I sent Hannibal. I sent my eyes there for me."

"And you saw?"

"I did."

"You mean you could send him far away—"

"I sent him to the Asteroids," said Chambers. "To be precise, to Sanctuary. Millions of miles. And I saw what he saw. Still see what he sees, in fact. I can't see you because I'm blind. But I see what's happening on Sanctuary this very moment. Distance has no relation to telepathy. Even the first human experiments in it demonstrated that."

The phone on Chambers' desk buzzed softly. He groped for the

receiver, finally found it, lifted it. “Hello,” he said.

“This is Moses Allen,” said the voice on the other end. “Reports are just starting to come in. My men are rounding up the Asteroid jewels. Got bushels of them so far. Putting them under locks you’d have to use atomics to get open.”

Worry edged Chambers’ voice. “You made sure there was no slip. No way anyone could get wind of what we’re doing and hide out some of them.”

Allen chuckled. “I got thousands of men on the job. All of them hit at the same minute. First we checked records of all sales. To be sure we knew just who had them and how many. We haven’t got a few of them yet, but we know who’s got them. Some of the owners are a little stubborn, but we’ll sweat it out of them. We know they’ve got them cached away somewhere.”

He laughed. “One funny thing, chief. Old Lady Templefinger—the society dame, you know—had a rope of them, some of the finest in the world. We can’t find them. She claims they disappeared. Into thin air, just like that. One night at a concert. But we—”

“Wait a second,” snapped Chambers. “A concert, you said?”

“Sure, a concert. Recital, I guess, is a better name for it. Some long-haired violinist.”

“Allen,” rapped Chambers, “check up on that recital. Find out who was there. Drag them in. Hold them on some technical charge. Anything at all, just so you hold them. Treat them just as if they were people who had been cured by Sanctuary. Grab on to them and don’t let them go.”

“Cripes, chief,” protested the Secret Service man, “we might run into a barrel of trouble. The old lady would’ve had some big shots—”

“Don’t argue,” shouted Chambers. “Get going. Pick them up. And anyone else who was around when any other jewels evaporated. Check up on all strange jewel disappearances. No matter how far back. Don’t quit until you’re sure in every case. And hang onto everybody. Everyone who’s ever had anything to do with Sanctuary.”

“O.K.,” agreed Allen. “I don’t know what you’re aiming at, but we’ll do—”

“Another thing,” said Chambers. “How about the whispering campaign?”

“We’ve got it started,” Allen said. “And it’s a lulu, chief. I got busy-bodies tearing around all over the Solar System. Spreading the word. Nothing definite. Just whispers. Something wrong with Sanctuary. Can’t trust them. Can’t tell what happens to you when you go there. Why, I heard about a guy just the other day—”

“That’s the idea,” approved Chambers. “We simply can’t tell the real story, but we have to do something to stop people from going

there. Frighten them a bit, make them wonder."

"Come morning," said Allen, "and the whole System will be full of stories. Some of them probably even better than those we started with. Sanctuary will starve to death waiting for business after we get through with them."

"That," said Chambers, "is just exactly what we want."

He hung up the phone, fumbling awkwardly, then turned his head toward Monk.

"You heard?" he asked.

"Enough," said Monk. "If it's something I should forget—"

"It's nothing you should forget," Chambers told him. "You're in this with me. Clear up to the hilt."

"I've guessed some of it," said Monk. "A lot of it, in fact. Found some of it from hints in the manuscripts. Some from what I've heard you say. I've been sitting here, trying to straighten it out, trying to make all the factors fall together. The Asteroid jewels, of course, are the encysted life form from the fifth planet and someone on Sanctuary is using them to do to us just what they planned to do to the Martian race—may have done to the Martian race."

"The man out on Sanctuary," said Chambers, "is Jan Nichols, but I doubt if he is using the asterites. More probably they are using him. Some years ago he headed an expedition into the Belt and disappeared. When he came to light again he was the head of Sanctuary. Somehow, while he was out there, he must have come under control of the asterites. Maybe someone played a violin, struck just the right note when he had an Asteroid jewel on his person. Or it might have happened some other way. There's no way of knowing. The worst of it is that now he probably is convinced he is engaged in a great crusade. That's the most dangerous thing about the asterites or the fifth-planet people or whatever you want to call them. Their propaganda is effective because once one is exposed to them he becomes one of them, in philosophy if not in fact and, after all, it's the philosophy, the way of thinking that counts."

Chambers shuddered, as if a cold wind might be sweeping through the room. "It's a beautiful philosophy, Monk. At least, on the surface. God knows what it is underneath. I gained a glimpse of it, several times, through Hannibal. It was that strong, strong enough even to force its way through the veil of hatred that he held for them, powerful enough to reach through the vengeance in his mind. The vengeance that's driving him out there now."

"Vengeance?" asked Monk.

"He's killing them," said Chambers. "As you and I might kill vermin. He's berserk, killing mad. I've tried to call him back. Tried to get him to hide so we can rescue him without the certainty of losing

every man we sent out. For some reason, perhaps because he knows them better, hates them more, Hannibal can stand against them. But a man couldn't, a man wouldn't have a chance. Sanctuary is stirred up like a nest of maddened bees."

Chambers' face sagged. "But I can't call him back. I can't even reach him any more. I still see the things he sees. He still keeps contact with me, probably because he wants me to observe, through his mind, as long as possible. Hoping, perhaps, that the human race will take up where he left off—if he leaves off."

"Hannibal is carrying out his destiny," Monk said gravely. "I can patch it together now. Things I didn't understand before. Things I found in the manuscripts. Hannibal slept through time for this very day."

Chambers snapped his head erect, questioningly.

"That's right," said Monk. "The Martians, in their last days, perfected a fairly safe method of suspended animation. Perhaps they used principles they stole from the fifth planet, perhaps not. It doesn't matter. They placed a number of their people in suspended animation. How many, I don't know. The number's there, but I can't read it. It might be a hundred or a thousand. Anyway, it was a lot of them. And they scattered them all over the Solar System. They took some to the Asteroids, some to Earth, some to the Jovian moons, some even out to Pluto. They left them everywhere. They left them in those different places and then the rest of the race went home to die. I wondered why they did it. The symbol was there to tell me, but I couldn't read the symbol."

Chambers nodded. "You have to fill in too many things, the translation leaves too many blanks."

"I had a hunch," Monk said, "it might have been an attempt to preserve the race. A wild throw, you know. A desperate people will try almost anything. Where there's life, there's hope. Hang on long enough and something's bound to happen.

"But I was wrong. I can see that now. They did it for revenge. It ties in with the other things we know about the Martians. Perhaps the asterites had destroyed them. They had tried to destroy the asterites, were sure that they had failed. So they left behind a mop-up squad. The rest of them died, but the mop-up squad slept on against a distant day, playing the million-to-one chance. In Hannibal's case, the long shot paid out. He's doing some mopping-up out in Sanctuary now. It's the last brave gesture of a race that's dead these million years."

"But there are others," said Chambers. "There are—"

"Don't get your hopes up," Monk warned. "Remember the odds. Hannibal carried out his destiny. Even that was more than could have been logically expected. The others—"

"I'm not doing any hoping," Chambers declared. "Not on my own account, anyhow. There's a job to do. We have to do it the best we can. We must guard against the human race going down before the philosophy of these other people. We must keep the human race—human.

"The asterites' creed, on the surface, is beautiful, admittedly. What it is beneath the surface, of course, we cannot know. But admitting that it is all that it appears and nothing more, it is not a human creed. It's not the old hell-for-leather creed that has taken man up the ladder, that will continue to take him up the ladder if he hangs onto it. It would wipe out all the harsher emotions and we need those harsher emotions to keep climbing. We can't lie in the sun, we can't stand still, we can't, not yet, even take the time to stand off and admire the things that we have done.

"Peace, the deeper concept of peace, is not for the human race, never was meant for the human race. Conflict is our meat. The desire to beat the other fellow to it, the hankering for glorification, the tendency to heave out one's chest and say, 'I'm the guy that done it,' the satisfaction of tackling a hard job and doing it, even looking for a hard job just for the hell of doing it."

A springtime breeze blew softly through the window. A bird sang and a hushed clock ticked.

There were faces in the blackness that loomed before the speeding spaceship. Faces that swirled in the blackness and shouted. All sorts of faces. Old men and babies. Well-dressed man-about-town and tramp in tattered rags. Women, too. Women with flying hair and tear-streaked cheeks. All shouting, hooked hands raised in anger.

Faces that protested. Faces that pleaded. Faces that damned and called down curses.

Harrison Kemp passed a hand slowly across his eyes and when he took it away the faces were gone. Only space leered back at him.

But he couldn't shake from his mind the things those mouths had said, the words the tongues had shaped.

"What have you done? You have taken Sanctuary from us!"

Sanctuary! Something the race had leaned upon, had counted on, the assurance of a cure, a refuge from the mental mania that ranged up and down the worlds.

Something that was almost God. Something that was the people's friend—a steadying hand in the darkness. It was something that was there, always would be there, a shining light in a troubled world, a comforter, something that would never change, something one could tie to.

And now?

Kemp shuddered at the thought.

One word and he could bring all that structure tumbling down about their ears. With one blow he could take away their faith and their assurance. With one breath he could blow Sanctuary into a flimsy house of cards.

For him, he knew, Sanctuary was gone forever. Knowing what he knew, he never could go back. But what about those others? What about the ones who still believed? Might it not be better that he left them their belief? Even if it led down a dangerous road. Even if it were a trap.

But was it a trap? That was a thing, of course, that he could not know. Perhaps, rather, it was the way to a better life.

Perhaps he had been wrong. Perhaps he should have stayed and accepted what Sanctuary offered.

If a human being, as a human being, could not carry out his own destiny, if the race were doomed to madness, if evolution had erred in bringing man along the path he followed what then? If the human way of life were basically at fault, would it not be better to accept a change before it was too late? On what basis, after all, could mankind judge?

In years to come, working through several generations, Sanctuary might mold mankind to its pattern, might change the trend of human thought and action, point out a different road to travel.

And if that were so, who could say that it was wrong?

Bells were ringing. Not the bells he had heard back on Sanctuary, nor yet the bells he remembered of a Sunday morning in his own home town, but bells that came hauntingly from space. Bells that tolled and blotted out his thoughts.

Madness. Madness stalking the worlds. And yet, need there be madness? Findlay wasn't mad—probably never would go mad.

Kemp's brain suddenly buzzed with a crazy-quilt of distorted thought:

Sanctuary … Pluto … Johnny Gardner …. what is life … we'll try again—

Unsteadily he reached out for the instrument board, but his fingers were all thumbs. His mind blurred and for one wild moment of panic he could not recognize the panel before him—for one long instant it was merely a curious object with colored lights and many unfamiliar mechanisms.

His brain cleared momentarily and a thought coursed through it —an urgent thought. *Man need not go mad!*

Spencer Chambers! Spencer Chambers had to know!

He reached for the radio and his fingers wouldn't work. They wouldn't go where he wanted them to go.

Kemp set his teeth and fought his hand, fought it out to the radio-

control knobs, made his fingers do the job his brain wanted them to do, made them work the dials, forced his mouth to say the things that must be said.

"Kemp calling Earth. Kemp calling Earth. Kemp calling—"

A voice said, "Earth. Go ahead, Kemp."

His tongue refused to move. His hand fell from the set, swayed limply at his side.

"Go ahead, Kemp," the voice urged. "Go ahead Kemp. Go ahead, Kemp."

Kemp grappled with the grayness that was dropping over him, fought it back by concentrating on the simple mechanics of making his lips and tongue move as they had to move.

"Spencer Chambers," he croaked.

"You should have stayed in Sanctuary," blared a voice in his head. *"You should have stayed. You should have—"*

"Spencer Chambers speaking," said a voice out of the radio. "What is it, Kemp?"

Kemp tried to answer, couldn't.

"Kemp!" yelled Chambers. "Kemp, where are you? What's the matter? Kemp—"

Words came from Kemp's mouth, distorted words, taking a long time to say, jerky—

"No time … one thing. Hunch. That's it. Chambers … hunch—"

"What do you mean, lad?" yelled Chambers.

"Hunches. Have to play …. hunches. Everyone hasn't … got … them. Find … those … who … have—"

There was silence. Chambers was waiting. A wave of grayness blotted out the ship, blotted out space—then light came again.

Kemp gripped the side of his chair with one hand while the other swayed limply at his side. What had he been saying? Where was he? One word buzzed in his brain. What was that word?

Out of the past came a snatch of memory.

"Findlay," he said.

"Yes, what about Findlay?"

"Hunches like … instinct. See … into … future—"

The radio bleated at him. "Kemp! What's the matter? Go on. Do you mean hunches are a new instinct? Tell me. Kemp!"

Harrison Kemp heard nothing. The grayness had come again, blotting out everything. He sat in his chair and his hands hung dangling. His vacant eyes stared into space.

The ship drove on.

On the floor lay a stick, a club Harrison Kemp had picked up on Sanctuary.

The intercommunications set buzzed. Fumbling, Chambers

snapped up the tumbler.

"Mr. Allen is here," said the secretary's voice.

"Send him in," said Chambers.

Allen came in, flung his hat on the floor beside a chair, sat down.

"Boys just reported they found Kemp's ship," he said. "Easy to trace it. Radio was wide open."

"Yes?" asked Chambers.

"Loony," said Allen.

Chambers' thin lips pressed together. "I was afraid so. He sounded like it. Like he was fighting it off. And he did fight it off. Long enough, at least, to tell us what he wanted us to know."

"It's queer," Monk said, "that we never thought of it. That someone didn't think of it. It had to wait until a man on the verge of insanity could think of it."

"It may not work," said Chambers, "but it's worth a try. Hunches, he said, are instinct—a new instinct, the kind we need in the sort of world we live in. Once, long ago, we had instinct the same as animals, but we got rid of it, we got civilized and lost it. We didn't need it any longer. We substituted things for it. Like law and order, houses and other safeguards against weather and hunger and fear.

"Now we face new dangers. Dangers that accompany the kind of civilization we have wrought. We need new instinct to protect us against those dangers. Maybe we have it in hunches or premonition or intuition or whatever name you want to hang on it. Something we've been developing for a long time, for the past ten thousand years, perhaps, never realizing that he had it."

"All of us probably haven't got it," Monk reminded him. "It would be more pronounced in some of us than others."

"We'll find the ones who have it," declared Chambers. "We'll place them in key positions. The psychologists will develop tests for it. We'll see if we can't improve it, develop it. Help it along.

"You have it, Monk. It saved you when the asterites tried to get you that night in Sandebar. Something told you to heave that jewel against the manuscript case. You did it, instinctively, wondering why. You said that afterward you even speculated on why you did it, couldn't find an answer. And yet it was the proper thing to do.

"Findlay out on Pluto has it. Calls it a feeling for the future, the ability to look just a little ways ahead. That looking just a ways ahead will help us keep one jump beyond our problems.

"Allen has it. He investigated Sanctuary on a hunch, even felt ashamed of himself for doing it, but he went ahead and played his hunch."

"Just a second, chief," Allen interrupted. "Before you go any further there's something to be done. We got to go out and bring in

Hannibal. Even if it takes the whole fleet—"

"There's no use," said Chambers.

He rose and faced them.

"Hannibal," he said, "died half an hour ago. They killed him."

Slowly he walked around the desk, felt his way across the room toward the window. Once he stumbled on a rug, once he ran into a chair.

Construction Shack

"Construction Shack," certainly one of the subcategory of Simak stories that might be called "sense of wonder" stories, first appeared in the January-February 1973 issue of Worlds of If*, and it was regarded as a contender for a Hugo Award.*

This is the second Simak story to feature a smooth, metal planet (see "Limiting Factor," which will appear in volume 14 of these collections). It also features the line "No one would be mad enough to postulate a gang of cosmic engineers who went about the universe …"— Was it coincidence that in 1972 Cliff Simak would again find use for the title of his first novel, Cosmic Engineers*?*

—dww

In that same year when men first walked on Mars the probe was launched from the moon for Pluto. Five years later the first pictures were transmitted as the orbiting probe trained its cameras on the planet's surface. The transmission quality was poor; but even so, certain features of the photographs were productive of great anguish as old theories fell to shards and were replaced by puzzlement, questions with no hint of answers. The pictures seemed to say that the planet had a smooth, almost polished surface, without a single geographic feature to break the smoothness of it. Except that at certain places, equidistant from one another along the equator, were tiny dots that would have been taken for transmission noise if they had not appeared consistently. Too, the dots still persisted when some of the noise was eliminated. So it seemed they must be small geographic features or shadows cast by geographic features, although at Pluto's distance from the sun shadows would be suspect. The other data did nothing to lessen the anguish. The planet was smaller than supposed, less than a thousand miles in diameter, and its density worked out to 3.5 grams per cubic centimeter rather than the unrealistic figure of 60 grams, previously supposed.

This meant several things. It meant that somewhere out there, perhaps something more than seven billion miles from the sun, a tenth planet of the solar system swung in orbit, for no planet the size and mass of Pluto could explain the eccentricities in the orbits of Uranus and Neptune. The calculation of Pluto's mass, now proved inaccurate, had been based on the measurement of those eccentricities and it must be admitted now that something else must account for them.

Beyond that, Pluto was most strange—a smooth planet,

featureless except for the evenly spaced dots. The smoothness certainly could not be explained by a non-turbulent atmosphere, for surely Pluto had to be too small and cold to hold an atmosphere. A surface of ice, men wondered, the frozen remnants of a one-time, momentary atmosphere? But for a number of reasons that didn't seem right, either. Metal, perhaps, but if the planet were of solid metal the density should be far greater.

The men on Earth consoled themselves. In five more years the probe would come back to Earth, carrying with it the films that it had taken and from them, the actual films and not the low-quality transmissions, perhaps much that was hazy now might become understandable. The probe swung in its measured orbits and sent back more pictures, although they were little help, for the quality still was poor. Then it fired the automatic sequence that would head it back to Earth, and its beeping signals from far out in space said it was headed home on a true and steady course.

Something happened. The beeping stopped and there was silence. Moon base waited. It might start up again. The silence might indicate only a momentary malfunction and the signals might start again. But they never did. Somewhere, some three billion miles from the sun, some mishap had befallen the homing probe. It was never heard again —it was lost forever.

There was no sense in sending out another probe until a day when technical advances could assure better pictures. The technical advances would have to be significant—small refinements would do little good.

The second and third manned expeditions went to Mars and came home again, bringing back, among many other things, evidence that primitive forms of life existed there, which settled once for all the old, dark suspicion that life might be an aberration to be found only on the Earth. For with life on two planets in the same solar system there could no longer be any doubt that life was a common factor in the universe. The fourth expedition went out, landed and did not come back again and now there was on Mars a piece of ground that was forever Earth. The fifth expedition was sent out even while the Earth still paid tribute to those four men who had died so far from home.

Now that life had been found on another world, now that it was apparent that another planet at one time had held seas and rivers and an atmosphere that had been an approximation of Earth's own atmosphere, now that we knew we no longer were alone in the universe, the public interest and support of space travel revived. Scientists, remembering (never having, in fact, forgotten, for it had gnawed steadily at their minds) the puzzlement of the Pluto probe, began to plan a manned Pluto expedition, as there was still no sense in

sending an instrumented probe.

When the day came to lift from the Moon Base, I was a member of the expedition. I went along as a geologist—the last thing a Pluto expedition needed.

There were three of us and any psychologist will tell you that three is a number that is most unfortunate. Two gang up on one or ignore one and there is always competition to be one of the gang of two. No one wants to stand alone with the other two against him. But it didn't work that way with us. We got along all right, although there were times when it was rough going. The five years that the probe took to arrive at Pluto was cut by more than half, not only because of improved rocket capability, but because a manned craft could pile on velocity that couldn't be programed—or at least safely programed—into a probe. But a bit more than two years is a long time to be cooped up in a tin can rocketing along in emptiness. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad if you had some sense of speed, of really getting somewhere—but you haven't. You just hang there in space.

The three of us? Well, I am Howard Hunt and the other two were Orson Gates, a chemist, and Tyler Hampton, an engineer.

As I say, we got along fine. We played chess tournaments—yeah, three men in a tournament and it was all right because none of us knew chess. If we had been any good I suppose we would have been at one another's throats. We dreamed up dirty ditties and were so pleased with our accomplishments that we'd spend hours singing them and none of us could sing. We did a lot of other futile things—by now you should be getting the idea. There were some rather serious scientific experiments and observations we were supposed to make, but all of us figured that our first and biggest job was to manage to stay sane.

When we neared Pluto we dropped the fooling around and spent much time peering through the scope, arguing and speculating about what we saw. Not that there was much to see. The planet resembled nothing quite as much as a billiard ball. It was smooth. There were no mountains, no valleys, no craters—nothing marred the smoothness of the surface. The dots were there, of course. We could make out seven groups of them, all positioned along the equatorial belt. And in close up they were not simply dots. They were structures of some kind.

We landed finally, near a group of them. The landing was a little harder than we had figured it would be. The planetary surface was hard—there was no give to it. But we stayed right-side up and we didn't break a thing.

People at times ask me to describe Pluto and it's a hard thing to put into words. You can say that it is smooth and that it's dark—it's dark even in broad daylight. The sun, at that distance, is not much

more than a slightly brighter star. You don't have daylight on Pluto—you have starlight and it doesn't make much difference whether you're facing the sun or not. The planet is airless, of course, and waterless and cold. But cold, as far as human sensation is concerned, is a relative thing. Once the temperature gets down to a hundred Kelvin it doesn't much matter how much colder it becomes. Especially when you're wearing life support. Without a suit containing life support you'd last only a few seconds, if that long, on a place like Pluto. I've never figured out which would kill you first—cold or internal pressure. Would you freeze—or explode before you froze?

So Pluto is dark, airless, cold and smooth. Those are the externals only. You stand there and look at the sun and realize how far away you are. You know you are standing at the edge of the solar system, that just out there, a little way beyond, you'd be clear outside the system. Which doesn't really have to be true, of course. You know about the tenth planet. Even if it's theory, it's supposed to be out there. You know about the millions of circling comets that technically are a part of the solar system, although they're so far out no one ever thinks of them. You could say to yourself this really is not the edge—the hypothetical tenth planet and the comets still are out there. But this is intellectualization; you're telling yourself something that your mind says may be true, but your gut denies. For hundreds of years Pluto has been the last outpost and this, by God, is Pluto and you're farther away from home than man has ever been before and you feel it. You don't belong to anything any more. You're in the back alley, and the bright and happy streets are so far away that you know you'll never find them.

It isn't homesickness that you feel. It's more like never having had a home. Of never having belonged anywhere. You get over it, of course—or come to live with it.

So we came down out of the ship after we had landed and stood upon the surface. The first thing that struck us—other than the sense of lostness that at once grabbed all of us—was that the horizon was too near, much nearer than on the Moon. We felt at once that we stood on a small world. We noticed that horizon's nearness even before we noticed the buildings that the probe had photographed as dots and that we had dropped down to investigate. Perhaps buildings is not the right word—structures probably would be better. Buildings are enclosures and these were not enclosures. They were domes someone had set out to build and hadn't had time to finish. The basic underlying framework had been erected and then the work had stopped. Riblike arcs curved up from the surface and met overhead. Struts and braces held the frames solid, but that was as far as the construction had gone. There were three of them, one larger than the

other two. The frames were not quite as simple as I may have made them seem. Tied into the ribs and struts and braces were a number of other structural units that seemed to have no purpose and make no sense at all.

We tried to make sense out of them and out of the scooped-out hollows that had been gouged out of the planetary surface within the confines of each construct—they had no floors and seemed fastened to the surface of the planet. The hollows were circular, some six feet across and three feet deep, and to me they looked like nothing quite as much as indentations made in a container of ice cream by a scoop.

About this time Tyler began to have some thoughts about the surface. Tyler is an engineer and should have had his thoughts immediately—and so should the rest of us—but the first hour or so outside the ship had been considerably confusing. We had worn our suits in training, of course, and had done some walking around in them, but Pluto seemed to have even less gravity than had been calculated and we had had to get used to it before we could be reasonably comfortable. Nor had anything else been exactly as we had anticipated.

"This surface," Tyler said to me. "There is something wrong with it."

"We knew it was smooth," said Orson. "The pictures showed that. Coming in, we could see it for ourselves."

"This smooth?" Tyler asked. "This even?" He turned to me. "It isn't geologically possible. Would you say it is?"

"I would think not," I said. "If there had been any upheaval at all this floor would be rugged. There can't have been any erosion—anything to level it down. Micrometeorite impacts, maybe, but not too many of them. We're too far out for meteorites of any size. And while micrometeorites might pit the surface there would be no leveling process."

Tyler let himself down on his knees rather awkwardly. He brushed a hand across the surface. The seeing was not too good, but you could see that there was dust, a thin layer of dust, a powdering.

"Shine a light down here," said Tyler.

Orson aimed his light at the spot. Some of the gray dust still clung where Tyler had wiped his hand, but there were streaks where the darker surface showed through.

"Space dust," said Tyler.

Orson said, "There should be damn little of it."

"True," said Tyler. "But over four billion years or more, it would accumulate. It couldn't be erosion dust, could it?"

"Nothing to cause erosion," I said. "This must be as close to a dead planet as you ever get. Not enough gravity to hold any of the

gases—if there ever were gases. At one time there must have been, but they've all gone—they went early. No atmosphere, no water. I doubt there ever was any accumulation. A molecule wouldn't hang around for long."

"But space dust would?"

"Maybe. Some sort of electrostatic attraction, maybe."

Tyler scrubbed the little patch of surface again with his gloved hand, removing more of the dust, with more of the darker surface showing through.

"Have we got a drill?" he asked. "A specimen drill."

"I have one in my kit," said Orson. He took it out and handed it to Tyler. Tyler positioned the bit against the surface, pressed the button. In the light of the torch you could see the bit spinning. Tyler put more weight on the drill.

"It's harder than a bitch," he said.

The bit began to bite. A small pile of fragments built up around the hole. The surface was hard, no doubt of that. The bit didn't go too deep and the pile of fragments was small.

Tyler gave up. He lifted out the bit and snubbed off the motor.

"Enough for analysis?" he asked.

"Should be," said Orson. He took the bit from Tyler and handed him a small specimen bag. Tyler laid the open mouth of the bag on the surface and brushed the fragments into it.

"Now we'll know," he said. "Now we will know something."

A couple of hours later, back in the ship, we knew.

"I have it," Orson said, "but I don't believe it."

"Metal?" asked Tyler.

"Sure, metal. But not the kind you have in mind. It's steel."

"Steel?" I said, horrified. "It can't be. Steel's no natural metal. It's manufactured."

"Iron," said Orson. "Nickel. Molybdenum, vanadium, chromium. That works out to steel. I don't know as much about steel as I should. But it's steel—a good steel. Corrosion resistant, tough, strong."

"Maybe just the platform for the structures," I said. "Maybe a pad of steel to support them. We took the specimen close to one of them."

"Let's find out," said Tyler.

We opened up the garage and ran down the ramp and got out the buggy. Before we left we turned off the television camera. By this time Moon Base would have seen all they needed to see and if they wanted more they could ask for it. We had given them a report on everything we had found—all except the steel surface and the three of us agreed that until we knew more about that we would not say anything. It would be a while in any case until we got an answer from them. The time lag to Earth was about sixty hours each way.

We went out ten miles and took a boring sample and came back, following the thin tracks the buggy made in the dust, taking samples every mile. We got the answer that I think all of us expected we would get, but couldn't bring ourselves to talk about. The samples all were steel.

It didn't seem possible, of course, and it took us a while to digest the fact, but finally we admitted that on the basis of best evidence Pluto was no planet, but a fabricated metal ball, small-planet size. But Godawful big for anyone to build.

Anyone?

That was the question that now haunted us. Who had built it? Perhaps more important—why had they built it? For some purpose, surely, but why, once that purpose had been fulfilled (if, in fact, it had been fulfilled) had Pluto been left out here at the solar system's rim?

"No one from the system," Tyler said. "There's no one but us. Mars has life, of course, but primitive life. It got a start there and hung on and that was all. Venus is too hot. Mercury is too close to the sun. The big gas giants? Maybe, but not the kind of life that would build a thing like this. It had to be something from outside."

"How about the fifth planet?" suggested Orson.

"There probably never was a fifth planet," I said. "The material for it may have been there, but the planet never formed. By all the rules of celestial mechanics there should have been a planet between Mars and Jupiter, but something went haywire."

"The tenth planet, then," said Orson.

"No one is really positive there is a tenth," said Tyler.

"Yeah, you're right," said Orson. "Even if there were it would be a poor bet for life, let alone intelligence."

"So that leaves us with outsiders," said Tyler.

"And a long time ago," said Orson.

"Why do you say that?"

"The dust. There isn't much dust in the universe."

"And no one knows what it is. There is the dirty ice theory."

"I see what you're getting at. But it needn't be ice. Nor graphite nor any of the other things that have been—"

"You mean it's that stuff out there."

"It could be. What do you think, Howard?"

"I can't be sure," I said. "The only thing I know is that it couldn't be erosive."

Before we went to sleep we tried to fix up a report to beam back to Moon Base, but anything we put together sounded too silly and unbelievable. So we gave up. We'd have to tell them some time, but we could wait.

When we awoke we had a bite to eat, then got into our suits and

went out to look over the structures. They still didn't make much sense, especially all the crazy contraptions that were fastened on the ribs and struts and braces. Nor did the scooped-out hollows.

"If they were only up on legs," said Orson, "they could be used as chairs."

"But not very comfortable," said Tyler.

"If you tilted them a bit," said Orson. But that didn't figure either. They would still be uncomfortable. I wondered why he thought of them as chairs. They didn't look like any chairs to me.

We pottered around a lot, not getting anywhere. We looked the structures over inch by inch, wondering all the while if there was something we had missed. But there didn't seem to be.

Now comes the funny part of it. I don't know why we did it—out of sheer desperation, maybe. But failing to find any clues, we got down on our hands and knees, dusting at the surface with our hands. What we hoped to find, I don't know. It was slow going and it was a dirty business, with the dust tending to stick to us.

"If we'd only brought some brooms along," said Orson.

But we had no brooms. Who in his right mind would have thought we would want to sweep a planet?

So there we were. We had what appeared to be a manufactured planet and we had some stupid structures for which we could deduce not a single reason. We had come a long ways and we had been expected to make some tremendous discovery once we landed. We had made a discovery, all right, but it didn't mean a thing.

We finally gave up with the sweeping business and stood there, scuffing our feet and wondering what to do next when Tyler suddenly let out a yell and pointed at a place on the surface where his boots had kicked away the dust.

We all bent to look at what he had found. We saw three holes in the surface, each an inch or so across and some three inches deep, placed in a triangle and close together. Tyler got down on his hands and knees and shone his light down into the holes, each one of them in turn.

Finally he stood up. "I don't know," he said. "They could maybe be a lock of some sort. Like a combination. There are little notches on the sides, down at the bottom of them. If you moved those notches just right something might happen."

"Might blow ourselves up, maybe," said Orson. "Do it wrong and bang!"

"I don't think so," said Tyler. "I don't think it's anything like that. I don't say it's a lock, either. But I don't think it's a bomb. Why should they boobytrap a thing like this?"

"You can't tell what they might have done," I said. "We don't

know what kind of things they were or why they were here."

Tyler didn't answer. He got down again and began carefully dusting the surface, shining his light on it while he dusted. We didn't have anything else to do, so helped him.

It was Orson who found it this time—a hairline crack you had to hold your face down close to the surface to see. Having found it, we did some more dusting and worried it out. The hairline described a circle and the three holes were set inside and to one edge of it. The circle was three feet or so in diameter.

"Either of you guys good at picking locks?" asked Tyler.

Neither of us were.

"It's got to be a hatch of some sort," Orson said. "This metal ball we're standing on has to be a hollow ball. If it weren't its mass would be greater than it is."

"And no one," I said, "would be insane enough to build a solid ball. It would take too much metal and too much energy to move."

"You're sure that it was moved?" asked Orson.

"It had to be," I told him. "It wasn't built in this system. No one here could have built it."

Tyler had pulled a screwdriver out of his toolkit and was poking into the hole with it.

"Wait a minute," said Orson. "I just thought of something."

He nudged Tyler to one side, reached down and inserted three fingers into the holes and pulled. The circular section rose smoothly on its hedges.

Wedged into the area beneath the door were objects that looked like the rolls of paper you buy to wrap up Christmas presents. Bigger than rolls of paper, though. Six inches or so across.

I got hold of one of them and that first one was not easy to grip, for they were packed in tightly. But I managed with much puffing and grunting to pull it out. It was heavy and a good four feet in length.

Once we got one out, the other rolls were easier to lift. We pulled out three more and headed for the ship.

But before we left I held the remaining rolls over to one side, to keep them from tilting, while Orson shone his light down into the hole. We had half expected to find a screen or something under the rolls, with the hole extending on down into a cavity that might have been used as living quarters or a workroom. But the hole ended in machined metal. We could see the grooves left by the drill or die that had bored the hole. That hole had just one purpose, to store the rolls we had found inside it.

Back in the ship we had to wait a while for the rolls to pick up some heat before we could handle them. Even so we had to wear gloves when we began to unroll them. Now, seeing them in good light,

we realized that they were made up of many sheets rolled up together. The sheets seemed to be made of some sort of extremely thin metal or tough plastic. They were stiff from the cold and we spread them out on our lone table and weighed them down to hold them flat.

On the first sheet were diagrams of some sort, drawings and what might have been specifications written into the diagrams and along the margins. The specifications, of course, meant nothing to us (although later some were puzzled out and mathematicians and chemists were able to figure out some of the formulas and equations).

"Blueprints," said Tyler. "This whole business was an engineering job."

"If that's the case," said Orson, "those strange things fastened to the structural frames could be mounts to hold engineering instruments."

"Could be," said Tyler.

"Maybe the instruments are stored in some other holes like the one where we found the blueprints," I suggested.

"I don't think so," said Tyler. "They would have taken the instruments with them when they left."

"Why didn't they take the blueprints, too?"

"The instruments would have been worthwhile to take. They could be used on another job. But the blueprints couldn't. And there may have been many sets of prints and spec sheets. These we have may be only one of many sets of duplicates. There would have been a set of master prints and those they might have taken with them when they left."

"What I don't understand," I said, "is what they could have been building out here? What kind of construction? And why here? I suppose we could think of Pluto as a massive construction shack, but why exactly here? With all the galaxy to pick from, why this particular spot?"

"You ask too many questions all at once," Orson told me.

"Let's look," said Tyler. "Maybe we'll find out."

He peeled the first sheet off the top and let it drop to the floor. It snapped back to the rolled-up position.

The second sheet told us nothing, nor did the third or fourth. Then came the fifth sheet.

"Now, here is something," said Tyler.

We leaned close to look.

"It's the solar system," Orson said.

I counted rapidly. "Nine planets."

"Where's the tenth?" asked Orson. "There should be a tenth."

"Something's wrong," said Tyler. "I don't know what it is."

I spotted it. "There's a planet between Mars and Jupiter."

"That means there is no Pluto shown," said Orson.

"Of course not," said Tyler. "Pluto never was a planet."

"Then this means there once actually was a planet between Mars and Jupiter," said Orson.

"Not necessarily," Tyler told him. "It may only mean there was supposed to be."

"What do you mean?"

"They bungled the job," said Tyler. "They did a sloppy piece of engineering."

"You're insane!" I shouted at him.

"Your blind spot is showing, Howard. According to what we think, perhaps it is insane. According to the theories our physicists have worked out. There is a cloud of dust and gas and the cloud contracts to form a protostar. Our scientists have invoked a pretty set of physical laws to calculate what happens. Physical laws there were automatic—since no one would be mad enough to postulate a gang of cosmic engineers who went about the universe building solar systems."

"But the tenth planet," persisted Orson. "There has to be a tenth planet. A big, massive—"

"They messed up the projected fifth planet," Tyler said. "God knows what else they messed up. Venus, maybe. Venus shouldn't be the kind of planet it is. It should be another Earth, perhaps a slightly warmer Earth, but not the hellhole it is. And Mars. They loused that up, too. Life started there, but it never had a chance. It hung on and that was all. And Jupiter, Jupiter is a monstrosity—"

"You think the only reason for a planet's existence is its capability of supporting life?"

"I don't know, of course. But it should be in the specs. Three planets that could have been life-bearing and of these only one was successful."

"Then," said Orson, "there could be a tenth planet. One that wasn't even planned."

Tyler rapped his fist against the sheet. "With a gang of clowns like this anything could happen."

He jerked away the sheet and tossed it to the floor.

"There!" he cried. "Look here."

We crowded in and looked.

It was a cross section, or appeared to be a cross section, of a planet.

"A central core," said Tyler. "An atmosphere—"

"Earth?"

"Could be. Could be Mars or Venus."

The sheet was covered with what could have been spec notations.

“It doesn’t look quite right,” I protested.

“It wouldn’t if it were Mars or Venus. And how sure are you of Earth?”

“Not sure at all,” I said.

He jerked away the sheet to reveal another one.

We puzzled over it.

“Atmospheric profile,” I guessed half-heartedly.

“These are just general specs,” said Tyler. “The details will be in some of the other rolls. We have a lot of them out there.”

I tried to envision it. A construction shack set down in a cloud of dust and gas. Engineers who may have worked for millennia to put together star and planets, to key into them certain factors that still would be at work, billions of years later.

Tyler said they had bungled and perhaps they had. But maybe not with Venus. Maybe Venus had been built to different specifications. Maybe it had been designed to be the way it was. Perhaps, a billion years from now, when humanity might well be gone from Earth, a new life and a new intelligence would rise on Venus.

Maybe not with Venus, maybe with none of the others, either. We could not pretend to know.

Tyler was still going through the sheets.

“Look here,” he was yelling. “Look here—the bunglers—”

About the Author

During his fifty-five-year career, CLIFFORD D. SIMAK produced some of the most iconic science fiction stories ever written. Born in 1904 on a farm in southwestern Wisconsin, Simak got a job at a small-town newspaper in 1929 and eventually became news editor of the Minneapolis Star-Tribune, writing fiction in his spare time.

Simak was best known for the book City, a reaction to the horrors of World War II, and for his novel Way Station. In 1953 City was awarded the International Fantasy Award, and in following years, Simak won three Hugo Awards and a Nebula Award. In 1977 he became the third Grand Master of the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America, and before his death in 1988, he was named one of three inaugural winners of the Horror Writers Association's Bram Stoker Award for Lifetime Achievement.

About the Editor

DAVID W. WIXON was a close friend of Clifford D. Simak's. As Simak's health declined, Wixon, already familiar with science fiction publishing, began more and more to handle such things as his friend's business correspondence and contract matters. Named literary executor of the estate after Simak's death, Wixon began a long-term project to secure the rights to all of Simak's stories and find a way to make them available to readers who, given the fifty-five-year span of Simak's writing career, might never have gotten the chance to enjoy all of his short fiction. Along the way, Wixon also read the author's surviving journals and rejected manuscripts, which made him uniquely able to provide Simak's readers with interesting and thought-provoking commentary that sheds new light on the work and thought of a great writer.

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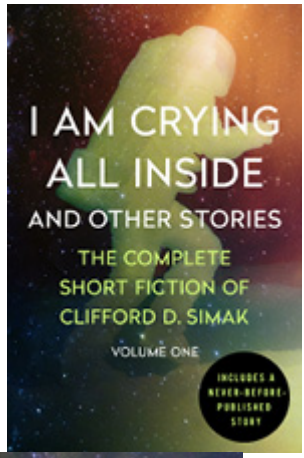
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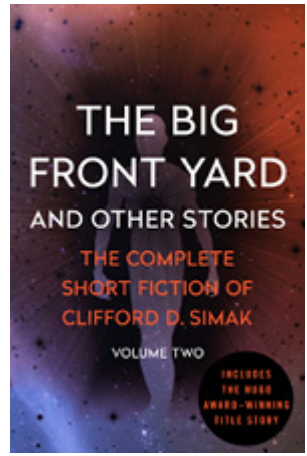
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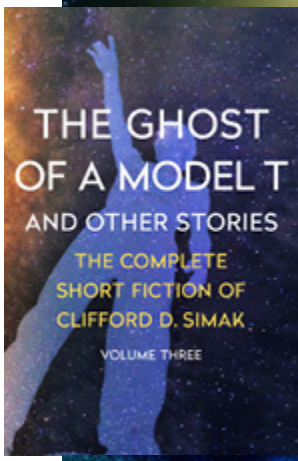
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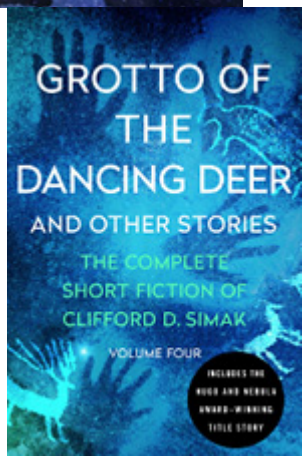
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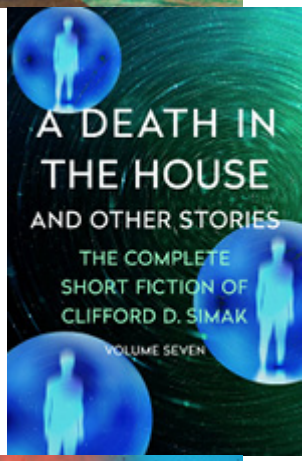
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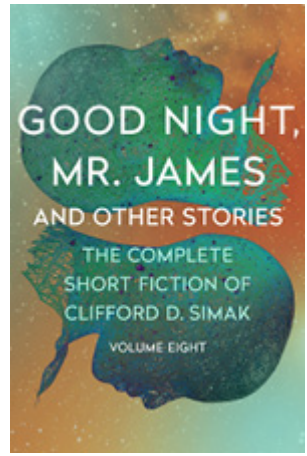
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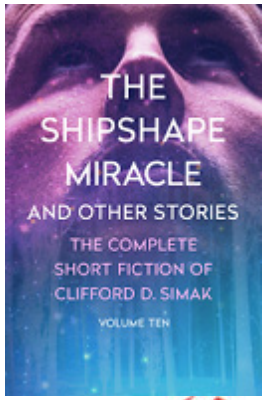

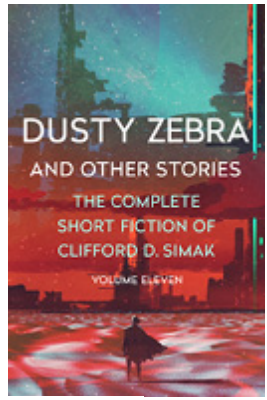

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